

**Peter R. Powell**  
**Rich Toward God?**  
**July 31, 2016**  
**Luke 12:13-21**

Someone in the crowd said to Jesus, "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me." But he said to him, "Friend, who set me to be a judge or arbitrator over you?" And he said to them, "Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions." Then he told them a parable: "The land of a rich man produced abundantly. And he thought to himself, 'What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?' Then he said, 'I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul, 'Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.' But God said to him, 'You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?' So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God."

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Today I have a hard Gospel that I would prefer not to have to deliver to you especially since I'm a guest in your pulpit and I've enjoyed spending most Sundays this July with you. However, I am committed to preaching the Gospel as it appears and not watering it down. When I was a graduate student at PTS and a priest associate at All Saints I preached on the Beatitudes from Luke, where they read, *Blessed are the Poor*, I didn't feel comfortable preaching on that text to a congregation from Princeton so instead I preached on Matthew's version, *Blessed are the Poor in Spirit*.

I can still remember the man who rebuked me. A professor of architecture at the University he asked me why I let the congregation off so easily when the gospel clearly meant the actual poor, not the poor in spirit. I learned my lesson.

We have just spent two weeks focused on politics. I watched very little of either convention, preferring instead to read about it the next morning or hear summaries on *Morning Edition*. However, a constant theme of both conventions is the focus on the Middle Class. One party wants us to be afraid, to live in fear of how changes in society are displacing some who lived as if entitled to a middle class existence and the other talks about how great we are and the only way to continue to have a healthy middle class is to look to the future and shape it to keep this country the greatest in the world. I may have distorted both positions so please simply see my characterizations as simply my take from all of the speechifying we've experienced. The point is that the parties are focused on the middle class. Should that be our focus? Is that what God is calling the church to do? Is our continued existence in the middle class the point of the Gospel?

I know very little about the demographics of Pelham and the surrounding communities. However it appears to me that most of us in this church this morning would fit comfortably in the middle class, however it is defined.

Then I read the gospel for today and I find in it absolutely no good news for the middle class. Jesus never says that we're the people who are at the center of the kingdom, or his proclamation of the kingdom. We are important to politicians because we vote. We are important to the church, as an organization, because we contribute. However, our salvation, the promise of eternal life, is constantly in doubt because we act

as if we deserve what we have. Or, as the gospel would say, we are susceptible to greed. Not a pleasant thing to be accused of. Our politicians whether Republican, Democrat or Libertarian act as if you and I are entitled to be middle class and we reward them for saying that and punish them if they should say, for instance, that we need to do more for the poor and will therefore have to remove some of the federal, state and local benefits that sustain a middle class lifestyle. For instance imagine the good that could be done were we to eliminate the mortgage interest deduction? It used to be, and probably still is, the greatest federal subsidy for a middle class lifestyle and preserving it uses resources that could be used for fighting poverty. People in my former line of work advocate for its elimination and we have never been taken seriously.

Enough or perhaps too much of politics. I am a realist, politically, which is how I survived promoting radical solutions for homelessness in a wealthy community.

The political message that dominates our culture is that we live in a Culture of Scarcity. There is simply not enough. Today's parable reminds us that all that we have is a gift from God, not to be grasped because we might die tonight, but to be shared freely and joyfully because we believe in a Theology of Abundance. There is enough in creation for all of to enjoy and lead meaningful lives. The lifestyle you and I have is a gift from God that if we believe in a Theology of Abundance, and that's pervasive in the Bible, Old and New Testaments, then we should share our wealth with joy.

What does the Gospel say? The last verse of today's Gospel, in every English Translation says that we are to be *rich toward God*. We have no idea what the Greek behind this phrase means. How are we to be rich toward God?<sup>1</sup>

What might that mean? At various times in Church History we have acted as if that meant we should adorn churches and build monuments. In May my wife and I were on a Riverboat Cruise on the Danube and we were in more churches than I can count. I thought the tour should be renamed as the Baroque Tour. Christ was honored by outrageous ornamentation. Clearly that missed the point of the Gospel. Rich toward God does not mean using a lot of gold in church decoration.

At various times in Church History we have behaved as if doing a good act, a charitable act, was buying us merit in heaven so we had to do good things so that God would accept us into heaven. For instance we believed that God has to accept us if we died in a state of grace and the only person in all of time who died in a state of grace was Henry VIII. He knew his sins well so as he was growing frail he had a monk from France follow him around and every time Henry stumbled the priest put a consecrated wafer on Henry's tongue. In case this wasn't enough Henry endowed in perpetuity daily private votive masses to be said at the Cathedral of Notre Dame for him and they were said until Vatican II when they were deemed to be superstition and not spirituality. Henry didn't trust that the priests in England were still priests so he sent to France and endowed votive masses in Paris. It that's how one gets to eternal life then Henry, with all of his notorious sins, is there.

So what might rich toward God mean? Next Sunday's Gospel continues the theme. We become rich toward God by living lives that are characterized by caring for what God cares about. We find God by working with the needy, the poor, in biblical language the widowed and orphaned and in our language the homeless, those in prison,

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<sup>1</sup> Joshua A. Noble, "Rich Toward God": Making Sense of Luke 12:21." *Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, 78/2 (2016) pp. 302-320.

those who are sick, those who are refugees, those who want what we have and the stability we enjoy. To be rich toward God means that we live as if all that we have is truly a gift and we are not to grasp it but to let it go and spend it lavishly on those who do not have what we have. This is a hard Gospel. Rather than stating that the most important thing in the world is to preserve the middle class, the Gospel says that the most important thing in the world is for us to give sacrificially to the poor. Not because we gain merit in heaven but because in working with the poor we are guaranteed to find God.

The Rich Fool sought to hoard his new found wealth and his folly was that he died without enjoying it at all. We are called to share the blessings given us lavishly because we will meet Christ in the poor.

In my reading of the New Testament we are given two ways to be certain we encounter Christ. The one we're most accustomed to is The Eucharist. I believe that in the Eucharistic prayer the bread and wine are transformed into the body and blood of Christ and we are transformed into a people who understand and comprehend this. I also believe that throughout the Gospels, particularly in today's, we are shown the other way to know we are interacting with Our Lord; that is, we find Jesus in being with, sharing with and having the poor be part of our existence, not our charity but the substance of our lives.