

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Reverend Mary Newberg Gale
Sunday, August 3, 2025

I invite you to join me in the spirit of prayer.

Gracious God, your word speaks across centuries.

It ignites your fire within us. It challenges us to see things new. and it connects us deeply with you and with one another. In this moment, may the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable in your sight. Amen.

As Joshua did indeed share with the children, our scripture this morning comes from the Gospel of Luke, chapter 12, starting with verse 13. Hear these words from the early church.

Someone in the crowd said to Jesus, "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me." But Jesus said to him, "Friend, who has set me to be a judge or arbitrator over you?" And Jesus said to the disciples, "Take care. Be on your guard against all kinds of greed, for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions. Then Jesus 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?" And then the man 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, and 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.

Friends, these are the words of our Lord. Thanks be to God.

It has been nearly 40 years since Gordon Gecko stood on a television screen and pronounced in Wall Street, "Greed is good."

And not just that, we can see how that ripple, even just from a movie which was telling the real life story of a stock broker and trader, mind you. but even in that movie, we can see how that idea manifested and rippled throughout American history, throughout the history of the world actually. It just took the 80s for somebody to stand up and say it probably that clearly. But that idea that greed is something to indeed be hoarded, that greed can be good, is something we carry with us culturally, even when we struggle with it. And in truth, as I said, that concept has been around the world for as long as there have been people. We see it in the Gospel of Luke. Luke talks more than any other gospel about the poor. You know the Beatitudes that are in both Matthew and in Luke, Matthew starts them with "Blessed are the poor in spirit." Luke says

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“Blessed are the poor.” Full stop. So the story we hear today, the story about money and wealth, is one that is indeed unique to Luke, but tied very deeply to Luke's narrative of a conversation and focus about community and society. I want to be clear and fair to this poor man that we are calling a fool, that our headings in our Bibles call a fool. There's nothing in this text that Jesus says that paints him as evil. There's no theft. There's no manipulation. There's no mistreatment. And Jesus has told plenty of other parables that included those things. In fact, sometimes we can look at this story and wonder what the problem is. This man just seems like a good businessman. Seems responsible. He had an excess. He knew that he needed to save for a rainy day. So, he did the things that one should do to prepare for the future. I do find it curious that in the conversation the rich fool has, he quotes Isaiah 22, chapter 13. He says, "Soul, you can rest for you have stored enough away. You can eat, drink, and be merry." But he completely forgot the second half of that verse in Isaiah, which says, "For tomorrow you die." Now, the people who heard Jesus's parable would have known that immediately.

And when we look closely, we might be able to see why Jesus calls this man a fool.

The pronouns in the story dominate it. I, me, mine, myself. 11 times in three verses. This rich man says, "I, me, mine, myself." He talks to himself. He plans for himself. He congratulates himself. There is no concern for God and no concern for others. It's about how he is conceptualizing a blessing from God, a surplus that he did not expect nor did he do anything to earn. And then that blessing's call upon his life. It's an obstinate disregard for God that Jesus is calling foolish. Previously, in chapter 11, Jesus tells the disciples directly to trust in God for their needs, to trust not in their own wisdom and might or in the work of their hands, but in the God that sees and provides for them.

This man in our parable considered no one beyond himself. He's wrestling with something I think we all wrestle with—the failure to see the distinction between what one has and what one is. Now, money is oftentimes talked about in church contexts as neither here nor there. It is morally neutral. Jesus isn't actually talking about the money in this text. And yet Jesus talks more about money than any other topic in the four gospels. Wealth and the privilege wealth provides are one of Jesus's biggest concerns because wealth can be something that distorts us, that makes us defensive. Whether we have a lot or whether we have a little, it colors every interaction that we have. Money is immediately tangible. The community, the relationships, the things that Jesus is calling the people to strive for, those are more difficult to quantify.

Now, we struggle with this text, or I won't speak for you guys. I struggle with this text because it is in direct conflict with our cultural norms. Planning for a future, leaving a legacy is a central

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piece of how we understand our goals in life. Setting money aside for retirements or in case of emergencies or to put kids through college is reasonable and right.

Concern for the future is appropriate, can be appropriate, but it must be balanced with the demand that God places on our lives, that demand to love God and love one another. When the pronouns I, me, mine become the drumbeat in our heads and in our hearts like the rich fool, then we lose sight of God. And truthfully, we lose sight of ourselves.

So what do we do with all of this? What do we, as by standards of the United States and definitely of the world, are an incredibly well-educated, an incredibly privileged and an incredibly wealthy congregation. What do we do with this? I think it hinges on that last verse, what it means to be rich toward God.

Now Jesus has told us throughout the gospels, in particular the Gospel of Luke, I think, what it means to be rich toward God. He says in chapter 4 that he came to proclaim release to the captives, to restore sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.

He says in chapter six, "Do unto others, friends, as you would have them do unto you."

So what is being rich toward God?

It's standing firmly in place and arguing against the idea that greed is good in any of its forms. Resentment, distrust, hoarding, whatever it looks like, that is not what God has called us to be. Being rich toward God means living with grateful hearts, focusing on our neighbors, and asking the question, "What has God called me to do with this blessing I have?"

Being rich toward God means challenging the way we think and the way we live, the choices that we make, both small and large, inside and most importantly outside the walls of this building in our day to day life.

It means being aware of God and of others. My friend and colleague, the Reverend Greg Bolt, said this to his congregation in Salem, Oregon, last week. He says, "If we continue to argue for, vote for, and advocate for things that help us alone, I, me, and mine, we are condemning ourselves, friends. Such is foolishness. God's love extends to all and God's obligation extends to all. I have a part to play. You have a part to play in the redemption of this world right here, right now. Not in some faroff future."

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And, friends, in the moments where we are able to set aside ego, where we can take a deep breath and let go of our fear, our anxieties, our foolishness, and even our greed, it is in those moments that we can begin kingdom work. And even if those moments are fewer and farther between than we had hoped, than we want them to be, every time we stop and we take stock and we turn back to God, we take a new step on the journey. The rich fool's mistake was his focus on self and his focus on scarcity.

It's hard not to focus on scarcity in a world that says repeatedly, "You have to get yours before somebody else gets theirs or there won't be enough."

The rich fool couldn't see that the abundance that God had given to him went beyond him. He couldn't see that God's abundance bears little resemblance to our idea of abundance. But it is indeed the bread that feeds and nourishes our very souls.

When we gather here in this room, when we gather at this table, as we will do in just a moment, we have a chance to be rearranged, to be reordered, to be recentered. Our hearts are liberated, even if only for a few moments, from the drumbeat of that individual focus. and our eyes are opened to see the world as God would have it. All of us connected with one another across all divisions and barriers, bound to one another in ways we can scarcely imagine, responsible to and for one another, and called to work here and now. toward the fullness that God envisions for us all.

May that vision be so this day and every day. Amen.