

Generosity and Connection: The Antidote to Greed and Despair  
Luke 12:13-22, Ecclesiastes 1:2, 12-14, 2:18-23; and Psalm 49:1-12  
Pastor Caitlin Trussell with Augustana Lutheran Church on July 31, 2022

Last Sunday, Pastor Ann preached about the audacity of this congregation to live life on Jesus' terms and not just on our own.<sup>1</sup> To live and pray and serve as Jesus did. To imagine what could be done with the empty land just down the hill from this sanctuary as part of our strategic planning. To vote as a congregation to partner with Habitat for Humanity to build affordable townhomes. Pastor Ann preached about that over four-year process and the persistence of the congregation that culminated in the rezoning vote at the next day's Denver City Council meeting. I'm very excited to report that this past Monday, Denver City Council voted unanimously to rezone, 13-0.<sup>2</sup>

At the City Council meeting, Pastor Ann and Council President Michael Zumwalt testified on behalf of the rezoning alongside one of our neighbors representing the South Hilltop Neighborhood Association, alongside our partners from Habitat for Humanity Metro Denver. Councilwoman Amanda Sawyer added her enthusiastic remarks about the congregation and the process it took to get here. There is A LOT of excitement in the City of Denver about this Affordable Housing! (My sermon copies include a link to check it out.) It's unique to have the neighborhood association, the developer (Habitat), AND a faith community working together towards a shared goal of housing – so that, as Pastor Ann preached, “people we haven't met yet will have a safe and decent place to call home.”

Homes come in all shapes and sizes. Multifamily homes like apartments and condos. Single family homes from the tiny to the towering. Common denominators shared by all homes are money and people. People need homes and money to sustain them whether they're rented or owned. We often talk about money as if it's a disconnected thing. Money's over there while people are over there. The two topics get disconnected as if one has nothing to do with the other.

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<sup>1</sup> Watch her powerful sermon here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fKgPQP8TXbM>

<sup>2</sup> Listen to those 32 minutes about the rezoning vote of the Denver City Council meeting here: [https://denver.granicus.com/player/clip/14946?meta\\_id=1105979](https://denver.granicus.com/player/clip/14946?meta_id=1105979)

I wonder if this could be why Jesus gets right to the point when he talks about money. People and money are as connected as it gets and Jesus focuses on connecting people with God and each other. Like today's Gospel reading from Luke about the disputed inheritance and Jesus' parable about the rich fool. It was normal for a younger brother to bring inheritance questions to their rabbis who could settle a dispute.<sup>3</sup> He was likely a younger brother because there was a norm in estate law of the time that either kept the estate fully intact by the oldest son OR that allotted the older brother a double-share with the younger brother receiving a third – much like the younger brother in the Prodigal son parable<sup>4</sup> who received one-third of his father's estate.<sup>5</sup> Somehow Jesus was on to the younger son's greedy motives because he answered his question with the parable about the greed of the rich fool.

Even Jesus' easy parables aren't easy. At face value, the parable of the rich fool is kind of simple. Simply interpreted: Greed is bad; and so is the man who builds the bigger barn. So what if the man builds a bigger barn? It's HIS grain. He can do what he wants with grain produced on his land. But the reality of parables is that they have layers, layers that wrap around listeners and pull us in. Pull us in and shine light on our own lives by the parable. Here's a layer. Building a bigger barn focuses on HIS wealth, himself and no one else. He's not simply a rich fool, he's also a lonely one. His bigger barn builds walls not only around his grain but between himself and his community. He dies alone with no one to give it to. Missing the chance to bless God by blessing others.

Greed as a topic is difficult. No one enjoys self-examination on the greed spectrum. It's made extra difficult because we humans have a survival instinct that trips us up. This is one reason that the empty tomb of resurrection is helpful. The empty tomb is the end of the story promised through the cross of Christ. Because we know the end is rich in God's promise, we're free to examine the middle of the story; our own stories through the lens of the parable of the rich fool.

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<sup>3</sup> Niveen Saras, Pastor, Immanuel Lutheran Church of Wausau, Wausau, WI. Commentary on Luke 12:13-21 for WorkingPreacher.org

<sup>4</sup> Luke 15:11-16

<sup>5</sup> Saras, Ibid.

His greed is one example of self-preservation run amok. He has so much grain at his disposal that his bigger barn turns into his only idea. The rich fool is in an echo chamber of his own making. He turns only to himself about what to do with all his grain. Once he decides to build a bigger barn, he tells his soul to relax, eat, drink, and be merry. He doesn't talk with his workers, his community, or God. And he curves in on himself even further by taking his own advice. And then he dies alone, curved around his wealth yet unable to take it with him.

Jesus often convicts his listeners, showing them how curved in on themselves they've become. Turned inward and, therefore, turned away from God. And turned inward and turned away from neighbors. Jesus attempts to turn the younger son, who is worried about his inheritance, outwards. The parable about the man who builds the bigger barn can be heard as Jesus' attempt to wake up that younger son along with everyone else who is listening in, and live life on Jesus' terms and not our own. Jesus' terms include right-sizing ourselves alongside everyone else. As his mother Mary sang in her Magnificat earlier in Luke, "Bringing down the powerful...and lifting up the lowly."<sup>6</sup> Leveling and strengthening the connections between each other as a meaningful way to live before any of us flat lines.

Last weekend, a lot of my time was spent with families who were saying goodbye to loved ones who had died. When we celebrate someone's life, we often say quite a bit about the person who died. We remember them and we remember God's promises to them. I often remind people during the welcome that as we celebrate the person who died, funerals can also bring up other losses in our lives, allowing grief a sacred space and time. With each funeral, as I listen to the stories about the person who died, it makes me grateful for the ways that I knew that person, grateful for other people in my life who have died, and grateful for the precious fragility of my own life and the people I love.

In Ecclesiastes, the writer known as the Teacher reflects on mortality. In the verses read today, the Teacher is almost cynical about the transience of life. Here one minute, gone the next. The Hebrew word for vanities is "hebel," meaning

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<sup>6</sup> Luke 1:52

breath or vapor.<sup>7</sup> “All is vapor...and a chasing after the wind,” says the Teacher who reminds us what really matters about life. The Psalm is nicely paired with both Ecclesiastes and the parable in getting us to think about the value of life. The parable reveals the value of life in the tragedy of the rich fool who wastes his life by spending abundant wealth only himself, the psalmist reflects the value of life in a matter-of-fact way – you’re mortal and finite so you can either trust God or trust self and wealth; and Ecclesiastes edges toward the cynical before the Teacher turns the book towards hope in later verses.<sup>8</sup>

The value of life is worth wrangling through hard conversations, intense prayer, and careful thinking. Figuring out how to spend our moments and our money makes at least the attempt to align our lives on Jesus’ terms, focusing on life with our short spans of life together here. Encouraging each other along the way lest we fall into despair or turn inwards on ourselves and lose sight of each other and of God. One of the gifts of being part of a faith community is the gift of reminding each other to uncurl from inward turning. Christ unleashes us from the perils of self-preservation at the expense of our neighbors by reminding us that we belong to each other and to God, inspiring generosity as the very antidote to greed and connection as the antidote to despair. In the very next verses after our Luke reading, Jesus tells his followers not to worry. Next week we’ll hear a few of these verses as Jesus says, “Do not be afraid, for it is God’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom.” Reminding us once more that out of God’s generosity comes our own. Thanks be to God, and amen.

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<sup>7</sup> J. Blake Couey, Associate Professor of Religion, Gustavus Adolphus College, St. Peter, Minnesota. Commentary on Ecclesiastes 1:2, 12-14, 2:18-23. <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-18-3/commentary-on-ecclesiastes-12-12-14-218-23-5>

<sup>8</sup> Matthew L. Skinner, Professor of New Testament, Luther Seminary, St. Paul, Minnesota. Sermon Brainwave Podcast: #855 8<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost. <https://www.workingpreacher.org/podcasts/855-8th-sunday-after-pentecost-ord-18c-july-31-2022>