

Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost • August 4, 2013

St. John's Lutheran Church, Alexandria, VA

Rev. Braun Campbell

Luke 12:13-21

“Signs of the Church: Generosity”

How much of a fool are you?

Let's say that you've got twenty-four hours left to live. What are you going to do with the time that remains? One option would be to take a crazy-fast, sensational trip to someplace that you'd always wanted to visit, or something else like that which would check experiences off a so-called “bucket list.” Would you eat your favorite foods and indulge in treats that you've given up or otherwise not enjoyed for a long time? Go out on a spending spree or simply throw caution to the wind? All of these kinds of plans, though, are kind of stereotypical. Someone's put in an unlikely situation – most people don't know when exactly they're going to die a day in advance – and embarks on a fantasy to “make the most” of their last hours of life.

Realistically speaking, though, you wouldn't just up and run off to go do fantastical things with twenty-four hours left on this earth. Sure, once you got over the initial shock of the news, you might allow yourself some kind of special treat, but there's far too much that you'd want to get done otherwise. You're probably going to want to say goodbye to your friends and family, or at the least spend some time with them. When you've got people who depend on you, people that you love, like parents, a spouse, or children, you're also going to do what you can to make sure that they're going to have what they need once you're gone. If you've got any money or prized possessions, it'd be perfectly understandable if you'd make a plan to indicate your wishes on how that wealth should be disbursed. You'll have to update your will, then get all the right people all the right information for what to do when you're no longer around. You might even want to give some or all of your riches to a charity or another group that could put that gift to good use. It's not like you're going to need any of it anymore! So if these kinds of deeds are what you'd do if you had only a day remaining, why aren't you doing them now?

Did I say twenty-four hours? Make that twelve.

It makes sense that you'd want to spend the short time you'd have left to live in caring for the lives around you. At that point, you don't have to take care of yourself anymore, right? You can focus on giving to others because you've been freed from the responsibility of self-sufficiency. Parents raise their children with the understanding that at some point they will have to strike out on their own and make their own way in the world. Until that happens, parents provide food, clothing, shelter, education, and all the rest of their child's needs as best they can. Most of us have learned that in this world, you need to work to make a living, to provide for your own wants and needs. And we've got a lot of wants and needs! If there's anything left after you've covered all those, you can save it away for the future, to make sure that you'll have what you need down the line.

Six hours.

The rich man in Jesus' parable doesn't sound all that foolish. He seems pretty wise from an earthly perspective, having an abundance of wealth even before his fields produce a plentiful crop. Now, he's got more on his hands than he can handle! So asking to himself what he might do, he comes up with the brilliant idea to build bigger storehouses to save it all away. Once that's done, he'll have guaranteed his self-sufficiency for years and years to come. He can now take it easy – recalling the words of Ecclesiastes – kicking back to eat, drink and be merry. From his perspective, he is set!

Three hours.

In reality, the rich man didn't know what he was talking about. He was so locked in to the fallacy of self-sufficiency, he failed to see God's gifts. God made the plants in the man's fields grow and produce a great crop. God had provided all that the man needed in his life. God had even given this man his very life – and now God was requiring the man's life back from him, recalling his soul back to its rightful owner. Everything that the rich man had was a gift from God, yet he saw it all as the work of his own hand. **The man is foolish because he's convinced he's self-sufficient.** He's all about himself. He doesn't even seek outside input in considering what to do with the abundance of the crops that he seems to think he has given himself. It's all “my barns” and “my goods” and “my soul.” He doesn't love his neighbor as himself. The rich man has been trapped by the greed that he has mistaken for wisdom. The very wealth that he thinks will keep him going is in fact that which has really tripped him up.

Sixty minutes.

Greed wrecks us. It uses our fears and desires, our wants and our needs, to turn us away from a right relationship to God and the gifts that He gives. It makes fools out of us, just as it did to the rich man. In this parable, Jesus calls his hearers to the proper attitude towards possessions. A man in the crowd wants this teacher to get his brother to re-divide their inheritance – a riches that would have come through a death in the family – hoping for Jesus to interpret the Scripture in such a way that he could get more from his brother's portion. Instead, Jesus addresses the sin and selfishness that's at the root of the man's problem. Jesus didn't come to settle material disputes. Instead, the Son of God entered into His creation, giving Himself to free people from covetousness and greed.

**The life that Jesus gives isn't about grabbing up but giving out.** Wealth isn't a bad thing in and of itself. But all of God's gifts, including wealth, are meant to be enjoyed with others and not for self alone. Jesus corrects the rich fool's misunderstanding of the Scripture from Ecclesiastes: "There is nothing better for a person than that he should eat and drink and find enjoyment in his toil. This also, I saw, is from the hand of God, for apart from him who can eat or who can have enjoyment?" Chasing after more wealth is an empty end, vanity; however, food and drink and enjoyment are all gifts from God's grace. God's people, then, should take pleasure in God's gifts instead of chasing after the promise of future prosperity under the illusion of self-sufficiency. Rather than allowing abundance to become a snare that drags you down, give away your surplus. Abundance is meant to be shared, not hoarded. When you give away your surplus, God is providing for others through you.

Thirty minutes.

Generosity is another sign of the Church, reflecting who we are called to be as the people who Jesus liberated from the power of sin and death. Generosity is both attitude and action. In the first place, it's believing that God is the Giver of all things, including your very life as well as the forgiveness that sets you free from the snare of covetousness. That belief denies the deception of self-sufficiency and recognizes that it is God who really provides. In belief, then, generosity acts, sharing with others the gifts that God has given, in love – that selflessness which we ourselves have known through Jesus.

Throughout the year, many people come through our doors looking for assistance with their material needs. A lot of them probably go to the church under the misconception that we're here as a social service agency. But the Church isn't that; rather, we're here to serve our world as agents of God's grace. Giving from our surplus, we are able to assist with material needs. Most of the time that happens in our support of Koinonia, our neighborhood food pantry and community support organization, a collective effort of area congregations to be a blessing to those in need. Here at St. John's, we've got the Helping Hands Fund to provide for those from within our congregation who face emergency needs or require other financial support. Together as the Church, we have much to share. And in your own life as a Christian, you have much to share, too.

Let's say that you've got one minute to live.

How much of a fool are you? Consider the gifts that God has given you. Rather than grabbing up, live a life of giving out. Enjoy God's gifts as they are meant to be enjoyed, in the community of souls with which God has surrounded you. Share your surplus freely with people in need, loving others as yourself. Jesus has come to set you free from covetousness and to live in generosity.

Time's up.

**Amen.**