



## *Texts in Context*

# Treasures and Abundance: Preaching the Parable of the Rich Fool (Luke 12:13–21)

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### SUMMER PREACHING AND THE LECTIONARY

Although summer vacations sometimes interrupt preaching during July and August, summer months can be a breath of fresh air for those who manage to be intentional in their sermon planning and preparation. The pace of parish life tends to slow down a bit, allowing a little extra time for reading and study; worship services seem a little less hectic. For these reasons, I have often looked at the summer as a chance to revel in the task at hand and even to recover somewhat from the boredom I sometimes experience with my own preaching! For me that could mean some intentional summer reading on preaching or trying something new in sermon form. This summer, it will be examining the role of the lectionary in my preaching life.

A few years ago, I was leading a seminary classroom discussion of the pros and cons of preaching the common lectionary. As I confessed to being a lectionary preacher, a student responded with his concern: “Isn’t the preacher’s choice of text the first work of the Holy Spirit in preaching?” There followed a helpful conversation addressing many of the lectionary issues one can imagine.<sup>1</sup> We also talked about the Spirit’s role in the study, in the moment of proclamation, and in the heart of the listener. After a while, I owned up to a largely pragmatic reason for us-

<sup>1</sup>For a good summary of those issues, see Eugene L. Lowry, *Living with the Lectionary: Preaching through the Revised Common Lectionary* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1992).

*Preaching through the summer from the Lucan pericopes takes the congregation with Jesus on a journey to Jerusalem—one in which his coming passion and death are viewed in the light of his earthly teaching and ministry (and vice versa).*

ing the lectionary, admitting that it saved me from having one more task to complete in the midst of all the other demands of parish life.

But there are deeper, more pastoral reasons that keep me connected to the lectionary as well. One of them is certainly the depth the lectionary provides, as it covers so much of the story of Jesus and the mission of the early church. Further, I am grateful for the discipline the lectionary imposes, relentlessly pushing preachers beyond their favorite texts. Perhaps most important to me, however, is the degree to which the lectionary grounds preaching in the context of a congregation's life. While that may seem counterintuitive to some, aspects of theological tradition and ecumenical conversation that created the lectionary inevitably emerge in my reading, providing the means by which I engage with the larger church's voice and the voices of other pastors serving in the community. More concretely, because the lectionary dictates the choice of biblical readings, I find that I have more time to probe deeply the rhythms of congregation life while approaching the exegetical process. By merging the "horizons" of text and context, preachers can look forward to encountering a freshness, relevance, and timeliness that may amaze even the preacher.

Sacramental sermons provide a good example. As the celebrations of Eucharist and Baptism come in the congregation's worship life, preachers can be pushed to read texts anew and find theological, sacramental themes that would not otherwise be seen. Not all baptismal sermons should be based on passages that talk of water and not all communion sermons should engage biblical texts about remembering! The lectionary can empower preachers to imagine new partnerships of biblical text and congregational celebrations, events, or concerns.

The context of public events and issues can also be served in the preacher's interpretive dance with the lectionary. On any given Sunday, the reality of the world may cause a pastor to shift quite suddenly from an assigned text. I know I picked a different Scripture lesson as basis for my sermon on September 16, 2001, although many of my colleagues described how appropriate Luke's parable of the Lost Sheep appeared that Sunday. In March 2003, I followed the lectionary during the weeks leading up to the current Iraq war, as the language of good and evil was running rampant in the public square. Two weeks in particular stick with me, as Mark's narratives of the Gerasene demoniac and the story of the Syrophenician woman offered theological themes that seemed to connect so well with the tense world situation. Time and time again, my patient encounter with the lectionary has been more relevant to matters of context than I could have imagined.

All of this is backdrop to my interest in returning to the lectionary with renewed attention this summer. Perhaps, like me, you have enjoyed the chance to preach a summer series on the most familiar Old Testament Bible stories, or the Ten Commandments, or the parables of Jesus. I can easily see someone deciding to preach *lectio continua* through one of Paul's letters. But this summer I will stick with the lectionary and the readings from Luke's Gospel. For me, the decision is largely driven by context, although the context tugging at me isn't primarily pastoral or

worldly (though both of those cry out now as sharply as they ever have in my years of ministry). No, it is more a context of timing and focus.

The recent liturgical cycle of Lent, Easter, and Eastertide coincided with the frenzied attention offered to Mel Gibson's movie *The Passion of the Christ*. While I have little interest in revisiting the film or the issues and conversations it prompted, the obvious focus on those last hours of the life of Jesus seems to be nicely balanced by the diversity of the Lucan passages assigned for July and August. The hype and debate will have died down as summertime comes, but as the preacher walks with Luke in July and August, she can engage the congregation in the preaching, teaching, healing, and relationality of Jesus. Through Luke's eyes, if only in the lections taken from chapters 10–14, the hearers of the word are invited to focus on the breadth of the Lord's ministry.

Indeed, the Spirit's role is evident in the preacher's selection of a biblical text. Amid a changed pace and in the space created for summer worship, preacher and congregation can encounter Jesus of Nazareth in their shared preaching life. Luke invites us to ponder and to trust Jesus the Christ. In the words of a contemporary creed in my Reformed tradition:

We trust in Jesus Christ,  
    fully human, fully God.  
Jesus proclaimed the reign of God:  
preaching good news to the poor  
    and release to the captives,  
teaching by word and deed  
    and blessing the children,  
healing the sick  
    and binding up the brokenhearted,  
eating with outcasts,  
forgiving sinners,  
and calling all to repent and believe the gospel.<sup>2</sup>

#### SUMMER PREACHING IN LUKE

The assignments in Luke for these summer Sundays don't quite move through the Gospel in a continuous fashion. On the last Sunday of June, the lectionary steps into the section of Luke traditionally understood as the "Journey to Jerusalem," and the readings in this travel narrative continue deep into the fall. But for the nine weeks of summer preaching, the Gospel readings linger there in chapters 10–14, at the heart of Jesus' journey. In his commentary on Luke, Fred Craddock identifies a number of themes that may hold these pericopes together, including the motifs of travel, the number of mealtime encounters with Jesus, and the topic of discipleship. Ultimately, Craddock takes as his unifying theme the primacy of Jesus' journey to Jerusalem, the site of his suffering and death, asserting

<sup>2</sup>From "The Brief Statement of Faith," Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), commissioned 1983; available online at [www.pcusa.org/101/101-faith.htm](http://www.pcusa.org/101/101-faith.htm).

that it is this plot movement that was most likely in the minds of Luke's readers as they found themselves invited to encounter Jesus along the way to the cross.<sup>3</sup> Much of the material here is unique to Luke, and passage after passage invites readers of Luke's day and our own to encounter both Jesus and the reign of God he embodies.

So the preacher invites the congregation to journey to Jerusalem. In this travel narrative the people of God come upon scene after scene in the ministry of Jesus. Jesus appoints the seventy and sends them out two by two. For "the harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few" (Luke 10:1–11, 16–20). The hearers of the word are again invited to walk along that road from Jericho to Jerusalem, listening to Jesus tell the parable of the Good Samaritan (10:25–37). For Luke, the identity of Jesus is much more than teacher. It is important, then, to witness his encounter with Mary and Martha, observing his interaction with those who loved him so (10:38–42). In one chapter from Luke, the church sees Jesus sending out the faithful to serve, Jesus answering the toughest of questions with the most timeless of parables, and Jesus being welcomed into Martha's home.

But the summer journey continues as the preacher ponders Luke's version of the Lord's Prayer (11:1–13). At the beginning of August, another parable comes around, that of the Rich Fool, to which we will return below. This parable comes not because Jesus was asked a question, but because he was asked to settle a disagreement in a family (12:13–21).

Then come two Sunday gospel readings from the teaching of Jesus. The first offers the possibility of expanding on the most familiar of the proverbial sayings of Jesus, "For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" (12:32–40), and the second relates to the end of the age and Christ's coming not to bring peace but division (12:49–56). Preachers and hearers beware! And, above all else, avoid the temptation to skip over the tough parts of the lectionary's movement through Luke. For whatever reason, the story that follows—healing the bent-over woman—seems less familiar to me than most of the Lord's miracles (13:10–17). It is a grace-filled story of the care Jesus offered to someone who didn't ask for it. Occurring on the Sabbath, Jesus' act incenses the religious leaders but leaves the woman not only healed but also grateful, as she "stood up straight and began praising God."

This pairing of texts works well; for if the community of faith is going to wrestle one week with the Lord's teaching about the end of time and "father against son and son against father," then the preacher ought to come back the following week and proclaim the gospel word of Christ's touch. Then, on the last Sunday of August, the church can go to a banquet. Perhaps some sense of closure comes to the summer's preaching as the congregation gathers with Jesus for a meal in the house of a leader of the Pharisees. In that tense and formal setting, as he was being watched so closely, Jesus tells the parable of the great dinner (14:1, 7–14).

So summer in Luke brings a couple of meals, a few parables, a lasting prayer, and some tough teaching with which to grapple; along the way, it offers the

<sup>3</sup>Fred Craddock, *Luke* (Louisville: John Knox, 1990) 139–142.

preacher a chance to engage the context of the ministry of Jesus. Through the church's proclamation, the community of faith again confronts that complex picture of the Son of God, the Servant of all. The teaching, the healing, the praying—all of it occurs as the Savior heads for Jerusalem. For Luke, the ministry of Jesus must be understood in the context of cross and resurrection. Yet the gathered community must also be confronted by the cross and resurrection only in the context of the ministry of Jesus.

#### PREACHING LUKE 12:13–21

The parable of the Rich Fool is the reading appointed for the Ninth Sunday after Pentecost (August 1, 2004). Though the pericope doesn't quite stand alone, the parable itself is nicely framed by a question from the crowd in the beginning (12:13–14) and a summary comment from Jesus at the end (12:21). In the context of Luke's Gospel, the parable really can't be isolated from the teaching that follows it. However, it is always interesting to consider preaching the parable in and of itself. In other words, can the preacher consider reading and preaching about only verses 15–20? "Jesus told them a parable and it went like this..." Some may argue that such an approach is the purist way to engage a parable. Here the preacher would stop before Jesus' words about being rich toward God. Of course, the listeners may be a bit shocked to hear a parable devoid of any context, one that ends up sounding rather like the conclusion to a revival sermon where the preacher booms: "What if you were to die tonight?" But left to itself, the parable tells of a rich farmer whose soul was demanded of him on the very night that he had spent worrying only about building bigger barns.

Sharon Ringe offers a bit of defense for the rich fool. She points out that the main character in this parable is a successful businessperson who happens to thrive in "an economy where wealth and security are measured in the goods one has accumulated."<sup>4</sup> Compared to other parables, it can also be pointed out that there is no wrongdoing described here—no theft or bill inflation, no taking advantage of workers in the vineyard. On the surface, the one named by tradition as "the rich fool" seems to be preparing for his retirement where he finally can relax, eat, drink, and be merry. His goals resonate with many who express such a desire for a fullness of life in later years and seem no more egregious than our own concerns with pension plans, 401Ks, and IRAs.

The twist comes as God labels him a fool. Death comes calling in the parable, and God asks the rhetorical question that hangs in the air: "And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?" (12:20). God's question has other variations that all sound vaguely like "you can't take it with you." Perhaps the preacher can simply offer a list of such questions and comments and sit down, noting that we all came into the world with nothing and that we will go out in the same way. There is an affirmation here of the real leveling factor of death and the common lot of our

<sup>4</sup>Sharon H. Ringe, *Luke* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1995) 177–178.

humanity. When your life is demanded of you, it just doesn't matter how much stuff you have.

But whatever the confrontational value of such a sermon in our culture, there is something deeper going on here, and the preacher and listener must attend carefully to the context of God's rhetorical question. Note that God's commentary doesn't simply imply that death leaves you without a collection of belongings. The question of ownership refers back to inheritance. The introduction to the parable tells of the approach of someone in the crowd. Though the law would require an elder brother to inherit a double portion (Deut 21:17), a family member asks Jesus to support his request for a simple division. Jesus is asked to mediate a problem over an estate distribution. The situation seems unique. It is not a theological test or a request for eternal life. Jesus is being asked to settle a family dispute, a somewhat ironic request in the light of Jesus' announcement, later in the chapter, that his presence can cause division in the family (12:51–53).

But Jesus declines to act as judge or arbitrator over the situation, instead seizing the moment to teach, using this parable that ends with the ominous words: "So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God" (12:21). Those who seek to accumulate wealth for themselves while neglecting their relationship with God are like a rich man whose land produced abundantly. In providing that clarifying final summation from Jesus, Luke leaves little doubt as to the message of the parable and this section of his Gospel, repeatedly warning the hearers against too much focus on material things. Soon, Jesus will tell them what he told them in 12:21 yet again: "For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" (12:34).

As the preacher develops what it means to be "rich toward God," it becomes clear that the parable cannot stand alone in Luke's Gospel. For Jesus continues to teach his disciples about life and anxiety and the lilies of the field. An understanding of what it means to be rich toward God comes in the breadth of the Lord's teaching about being alert to the kingdom, being mindful of the urgency of faith, and remembering that "from everyone to whom much has been given, much will be required; and from the one to whom much has been entrusted, even more will be demanded" (12:48). Luke's reader can't stop with the parable of the Rich Fool. For ultimately, what it means to be rich toward God is modeled in the ministry of Jesus described along this journey to Jerusalem.

#### PREACHING AND THE CONTEXT OF ABUNDANCE

Tom Long raises this question about preaching the parables: "What can a sermon on this parable do to extend the power of the parable into the life of the congregation?"<sup>5</sup> To put it another way, how can this parable evoke a response in the hearers of the word? More specifically, how can preachers tackle the parable of the Rich Fool in the culture of abundance that defines many of our congregations?

<sup>5</sup>Thomas G. Long, *Preaching and the Literary Forms of the Bible* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1989) 103.

When preaching to generations that are currently passing on or receiving more wealth in terms of inheritance than any other, how can the preacher execute this biblical text in a fresh way in the lives of God's people? Given the similarity between the farmer of Jesus' parable and the culture of material abundance in which we live, the task is made far easier than usual.

Not long ago, I was going through the pile of magazines and catalogues that had built up on the table in the kitchen. Generally, the only value of such a process is getting rid of the pile! For some reason, however, that evening's mail call was different. I stopped at one point to glance at a copy of *The Christian Century*. On one page, a box of statistics caught my eye. According to the 2002 census, 34.6 million Americans live at or below the poverty line. That includes more than 12 million children and more than 12 million senior citizens; indeed, 16.7% of the children in this nation live in poverty.<sup>6</sup> While a staggering number, it didn't quite strike me until a few magazines later. Further down in the pile, I stopped to turn a few pages in the *Harvard Magazine*, an alumni periodical. Another set of numbers shouted at me. These had to do with the compensation earned by the top two performers of the team of managers handling the university's endowment. One person who managed the foreign fixed-income portfolio earned 35.1 million dollars in 2003. The overseer of the domestic fixed-income portfolio earned 34.1 million dollars.<sup>7</sup> Thirty-four million people in poverty. Sixty-nine million dollars in one year to two individuals working for an educational institution. Sometimes, even at the kitchen table, one can be jolted by the abundance of the world and the world's inability to care for God's children.

Through his Gospel, Luke seeks to draw hearers to the cross of Christ, where they may be overwhelmed through death to life by God's abundant mercy and forgiveness. Along the way, Luke leads us to a closer examination of what it means to be a follower of Christ and an inheritor of the kingdom he proclaims. Just as such a message, apart from the forgiveness of the cross, would be at best good advice and at worst only one more invitation to self-justification, so also we cannot afford to preach the cross with no reference to the character of the life of the Crucified One and of the world and kingdom he invites us to embrace. When reading and preaching Luke this summer, therefore, I counsel following our Lord all the way to the cross and resurrection, even when that means inviting our hearers to die along the way—to themselves, to their illusions of security through their possessions, to the culture of material abundance in which we live. In this lection, that shouldn't be too hard. Because, while preachers should probably stay away from writing parables, when it comes to extending the parables of Jesus into the lives of the congregation, sometimes you just have to stand there and show them where to look. ⊕

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<sup>6</sup>"Americans Living in Poverty," *The Christian Century*, 9 March 2004, 7.

<sup>7</sup>*Harvard Magazine*, March-April 2004, 69.