

**A Sermon from the Episcopal Parish of
St. John the Evangelist in Hingham, Massachusetts**

Preached by the Rev. Sr. Adele Marie Ryan, SSM on July 31, 2016 (Proper 13, Year C)

Go to any dictionary, look up the word, “garage” and you’ll find that the definition of a garage is a building that shelters automobiles. We have a garage at our place that hasn’t seen a car in over twenty years! Perhaps you do also. Our garage is full of stuff. Maybe yours is too. Among other things, our garage shelters a conglomeration of old gardening tools, partially used bags of fertilizers, a large trunk, an old toboggan, steel shelving, and a metal cabinet. Year after year we make sporadic attempts at getting this garage cleaned out so that, miracle of miracles – one day we might be able to put a car in this garage. This summer we’re at it again. How on earth did we accumulate all this stuff?

It is no secret that we live in a very materialistic society. This fact is exemplified by the bumper sticker of some years ago, “The one who dies with the most toys, wins.” Americans have become the world’s great accumulators. For many, possessions are the outward and visible signs of success.

Obviously, too much stuff is not an entirely new problem. Jesus told a parable about a rich man because he knew it would hold meaning for people listening to him two thousand years ago. His advice: *Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.*

The parable was prompted by a man who, stepping forward out of the crowd, tries to get Jesus to settle a dispute about the family inheritance. Refusing to get caught in the middle of it, Jesus says to everyone, “Don’t be greedy. Having a lot of stuff will not make you happy.”

Then Jesus tells the story of a rich man whose farm produced a huge crop. So this man asks himself: “What can I do? My barn isn’t big enough for this harvest.’ Then he says, ‘Here’s what I’ll do: I’ll tear down my barns and build bigger ones. Then I’ll gather in all my grain and goods, and I’ll say to myself, Self, you’ve done well! You’ve got it made; now you can retire. Relax, and have the time of your life!’ If this parable were made into a movie, the background music for the rich man’s soliloquy would have to be: “You’re so vain - you even think this life is about you.” Well, it all comes to an abrupt end the moment God enters the story and says, ‘Fool! Tonight you die. And your barn-full of goods – who inherits it?’

The rich fool is a recurring figure in the biblical wisdom tradition. This is the person who works hard to amass great wealth only to leave it at his death to heirs who fritter it away. Our first reading is from Ecclesiastes, a book we rarely hear from. Ecclesiastes is not so much good news as it is the bad news that must first be heard before the good news becomes audible. Centuries ago (according to an apocryphal tale) when it was being decided which books to include in the Old Testament, and which to leave out, Ecclesiastes almost didn’t make it into the Bible . This is hardly surprising given that it comes across as one long, drawn-out sigh of discontent, weariness and boredom. In statements that are typical of this outlook, The Teacher, as he is titled, describes life as “toil” and “vanity.” In today’s reading the Teacher offers the example of someone who has used all his ingenuity and energy to build a fortune only to have to pass on his property to someone who has not labored at all. Yet, in spite of

his dismal outlook we can be grateful that this grumpy old man of the Bible made it into the Good Book, if only because sometimes we feel that way ourselves.

It's hard to miss the point of the parable and the perspective of Ecclesiastes: You can't take it with you. But Jesus would have us go deeper than the bald facts of human mortality. Jesus brings the sad story of the rich man with his full barns and empty heart to this conclusion: "so it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God."

The rich fool filled his barn with Self and not with God. He's a fool because he lives in a first-person universe. He talks only to himself, he confers only with himself. He can't see beyond his own orbit; he's unaware that life is lived in relationship to the environment, to others, and to God. So, tragically, at the end of his life there's no one – not a single person - to whom he might sing: "Will You Miss Me When I'm Gone?"

The parable does not mean that wealth is wrong or that being successful is bad. Recall the story of the Good Samaritan: it was because the Samaritan was well-off that he was able to do something for the man beaten and robbed by thieves. Jesus is not saying that we should not have possessions, save for retirement, or not enjoy the material world. Jesus is asking each of us, "Where is your heart?"

Greed is based on the old adage that the more you get, the more you have. The opposite of greed, which is the selfless love of God and others – is based on the truth that the more you give away in love, the more you are. This is what it means to be "rich toward God." Or, in the spirit of the Methodist tradition: "Earn all you can, save all you can, give all you can, for as long as you can." We value God by valuing each other. This we can take with us when we die.

Later on today we'll probably do some more work on our garage. Those old gardening tools could be cleaned up and shared with the community garden club. The Salvation Army will certainly find a use for the metal cabinet and steel shelves. And, then perhaps, miracle of miracles - by the time winter comes, we'll be able to put a car in that garage.