

Beyond Myself

“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.” The ushers will now receive the offering.

No, not really. I was joking. But here’s a serious question: “Why did Jesus even need to tell this parable?” He gives the punch line before the story: “Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.” Then Jesus goes on to tell a parable. We expect to hear a story that will prove his point, a story about someone who’s very greedy. **But the man in Jesus’ story is not a bad man.** There is no hint that he acquired his land illegally or that he exploited his hired hands. Jesus says nothing about the man usurping the lands of the poor in order to raise coffee or cotton for export. Just this one straightforward sentence: “The land of a rich man produced abundantly.” I grew up on a farm in Iowa. It’s a wonderful thing when the land produces abundantly, when there’s enough rain to grow the corn knee-high by the Fourth of July, but not too much rain so the plants are drowned out, and hopefully, no snow before harvest.

The rich man’s land produced abundantly. Some in the crowd might have been saying to themselves, “He must be a very devout man” -- because at least some of them knew their Bibles! Deuteronomy 30 reads: “You shall again obey the Lord, observing all his commandments that I am commanding you today, and the Lord your God will make you abundantly prosperous in all your undertakings, in the fruit of your body, in the fruit of your livestock, and in the fruit of your soil.” (Deut. 30:

8-9a) The people who heard Jesus' parable might have been thinking to themselves, "God has surely blessed this man!" Jesus doesn't point out sinful behavior when he said the man's land produced abundantly.

But that wasn't all there was to the parable. Jesus lets the landowner speak for himself:

What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?
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.

What should I do? **I** will do this. **I** will pull down. **I** will build. **I** will store. **I-I-I-aye-yi-yi!** This man's world is so small that he talks only to himself. "What should I do?" he asks -- but he isn't asking anybody else. He answers his own question: "These are MY crops...MY barns...MY grain...MY goods." He has no connections beyond himself. He has no memory of God who commanded the people of Israel to leave grain at the edges of the field for sojourners and widows. He can't see beyond the edges of his own fields nor does he wonder if there are some people who have no grain at all. This man is isolated in a world he has created for himself. The land is his. The barns are his. The grain is his and the goods are his. He has no neighbor. He has no need of God.

The only words that sound like a prayer are the words of one man talking to himself. "And I said to my soul, 'Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.'" But there would not be "many years" -- there wouldn't be even one more morning. "You fool!" said God, "this very night your life is being demanded of you." God didn't call the man a fool because he was productive, but because the man was lost inside his own distorted definitions of the world. "My" barns

and crops, “my” grain and goods -- how foolish that will sound by morning. It would sound foolish even if he lives another fifty years.

Talking to yourself is not enough. Following Jesus calls us beyond ourselves – and Jesus’ call usually has ECONOMIC implications. This whole section of Luke is about **the odd economy of God**. Jesus summarizes this section by saying, “For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” You can’t read very far in the Bible without bumping into God’s odd economics! Wherever he went, Jesus called people beyond the “M” word: MY crops, MY grain, MY barns, MY stock options, MY 401K, MY possessions. Jesus knew this would be terribly difficult for people. Seeing beyond our own interests has become even more difficult in our time of history. “I” and “My” are more popular pronouns than “We” and “Ours.”

Consider the debates in Congress about the farm bill and food stamps. Some members of Congress want stricter work requirements for people who receive SNAP payments -- commonly known as food stamps. Since 91% of people in Congress are Christians, it’s not unusual to hear quotes from scripture. One favorite text comes from 2 Thessalonians. A representative from Texas cited Paul’s letter in the debates: “But you also know, in 2 Thessalonians 3:10, [Paul] says ‘when we were with you, we gave you this rule: if a man will not work, he shall not eat.’..I think it’s a reasonable expectation that we have work requirements.” Almost 45% of those who receive food stamps are children. (They shouldn’t be working.) Another 30% are elderly or people with disabilities. (They may not be able to work.) What about the rest? Many are working but don’t make enough to feed themselves or their families.

Jesus must wonder why people like that one rather obscure verse so much while they neglect most of the Bible. I’ve never heard anyone in Congress quote

Jesus' parable about the man who built bigger barns. My crops. My cotton. My hard work. My money. My subsidies. My, my, my! Somebody suggested that food stamp recipients should make their way onto the floor of the House. "We shouldn't permit our legislators to continue making these decisions in a vacuum, isolated from the very people whose lives they are toying with."¹

That is, our legislators shouldn't keep talking only to themselves. It's not enough to talk about MY crops and MY grain and MY barns and MY happy life. Jesus is calling us to see beyond the borders of our fields or bank accounts or investments. Jesus isn't trying to scare the hell out of us. He's trying to give us a vision of a truly abundant life.

—Barbara K. Lundblad © 2019

¹ Greg Kaufman, *The Nation*, July 16, 2013

Economist Paul Krugman wrote an op ed piece in *The New York Times*. In his essay titled “Hunger Games, U.S.A.” he wrote:

For decades, farm bills have had two major pieces. One piece offers subsidies to farmers; the other offers nutritional aid to Americans in distress, mainly in the form of food stamps (known today as SNAP – the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program). Long ago, when subsidies helped many poor farmers, you could defend the whole package as a form of support for those in need. Over the years, however, the two pieces diverged. Farm subsidies became a fraud-ridden program that mainly benefits corporations and wealthy individuals. Meanwhile food stamps became a crucial part of the social safety net.²

² Paul Krugman, “Hunger Games, U.S.A.” (*The New York Times*: July 15, 2013) A17

You probably know that the House voted to maintain farm subsidies – at a higher level than the Senate -- while completely **eliminating food stamps** from the bill. Why? Also writing in *The Times*, Gail Collins turned to Representative Stephen Fincher of Tennessee to answer that “why” question: “The role of citizens, of Christians, of humanity, is to take care of each other. But not for Washington to steal money from those in the country and give to others in the country.”³ He also quoted the Bible: “The one who is unwilling to work shall not eat.” (2 Thessalonians 3:10). Well, that’s not exactly a central text in scripture and nowhere does Jesus say such a thing. Not only that, but many people who receive food stamps ARE working. They just can’t make ends meet. Gail Collins ends her essay with this little note: “Congressman Fincher is a farmer who has, over the years, received \$3.5 million in federal agricultural subsidies, much of it for cotton.” I don’t know if he had to build bigger barns.

My crops. My cotton. My hard work. My money. My subsidies. My, my, my! This is what happens when we don’t listen or talk to anybody beyond ourselves. Did members of Congress ever talk to people who depend on food stamps? Somebody suggested that food stamp recipients should make their way onto the floor of the House. “We shouldn’t permit our legislators to continue making these decisions in a vacuum, isolated from the very people whose lives they are toying with.”⁴

³ Cited by Gail Collins, *The New York Times*,

⁴ Greg Kaufman, *The Nation*, July 16, 2013

