

**August 4, 2019**  
**Hosea 11:1-11, Luke 12:13-21**  
**The Rev. Dr. Mark W. Jennings**

I have to admit that I was almost embarrassed a few weeks ago when I looked ahead and saw that this lesson from Luke was the lectionary text for the day. Now you all know by now that back on the fourth of May, three months ago, my mother passed away. She lived in Oregon with my younger brother, Ken. And a few weeks ago, Ken sent out a text (nobody makes phone calls anymore, right) saying that as we all, my brothers and sister and I, were going to be gathering in Oregon for the scattering of my mother's ashes, that we should all go out to dinner afterwards and have some “adult” conversation. Uh-oh. Ken is the one who has been keeping mom's financial records, her will, all the records of the disposition of her property, etc. Now maybe you all have had conversations like this with your family members, but I promise you, our family, where nothing gets talked about, had never broached the topic of who got what from mom's estate. And I saw this scripture and took it as a warning that when we got together, that I'd better not be too greedy. What would I come back with? Did I need to bring an empty suitcase? Did I want some of my mom's stuff? We care about things, don't we? We have houses with basements and attics that are just used to store “stuff” that we don't really use. How many of us have two car garages that you can't even get one car into because there's too much other stuff? That's why storage is a whole industry. How many storage places do you see when you drive around town? Places that are just there because we have so much stuff.

Things are important! But are they? A few years ago, one of the books on the NY Times Bestseller List was Marie Kondo's “The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying Up: A guide to decluttering by discarding your expendable objects all at once and taking charge of your space.” Anyone who's been in my office might think that's something that I could use. How many of you have stuff in your basement or your garage that you really don't need? How many of you have gotten into the extreme shopping and because it's such a good deal, you got six cases of tomato soup and a hundred tubes of toothpaste at Costco or Sam's? How many of us want to build new shelves or have a new storage building out back

to house all this stuff we might need someday? Whether we are keeping too much stuff, or going through our stuff and tidying up, in a way both are the same problem—we are thinking too much about our stuff. Is this what our lives are all about? The things we own, either how much of it we have or how it is best organized?

In telling the parable about the rich fool, Jesus speaks to a person who is overly concerned about his possessions. Does this parable make you feel uncomfortable? Does it hit too close to home? Many of us who hear this parable, especially in a North American context, may wonder: Why is the rich farmer called a fool?

It would be easy for us to argue that the rich man is a wise and responsible person. He has a thriving farming business. His land has produced so abundantly that he does not have enough storage space in his barns. So he plans to pull down his barns and build bigger ones to store all his grain and goods. Then he will have ample savings set aside for the future and will be all set to enjoy his golden years. Isn't this what we are supposed to do? We have three children who are independent and earning money. Have I asked them if they have started contributing to a retirement account yet? Isn't that a responsible “dad” kind of question? But have I asked them if they contribute some to charity each month as well as their IRA? No, I haven't. What am I teaching them by what I ask them to do?

Isn't this what we are encouraged to strive for? Isn't it wise and responsible to save for the future? The rich farmer would probably be a good financial advisor. He seems to have things figured out. He has worked hard and saved wisely. Now he can sit back, relax, and enjoy the fruits of his labor, right? The Lutheran theologian Elizabeth Johnson says, “The rich farmer is a fool not because he is wealthy or because he saves for the future, but because he appears to live only for himself, and because he believes that he can secure his life with his abundant possessions.

When the rich man talks in this parable, he talks only to himself, and the only person he refers to is 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. And *I* will say to my soul, ‘Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry’” (12:17-19).<sup>1</sup>

The rich man’s land has produced abundantly, yet he expresses no sense of gratitude to God or to the workers who have helped him plant and harvest this bumper crop. He has more grain and goods in storage than he could ever hope to use, yet seems to have no thought of sharing it with others, and no thought of what God might require of him. He is blind to the fact that his life is not his own to secure, that his life belongs to God, and that God can demand it back at any time. I should tell you that my mother was nothing like the rich fool. In the last decade of her life, she had already given away most of her “things.” She had remarkably little stuff for us to go through. The adult conversation that my brother wanted to have was about who wanted her books or should they all go to the church lending library.

The rich fool in the parable pursues material wealth and that's all. He discovers all too soon that it is not possible to take those things with us. Is that what we pursue? Is that what our life is about? When the prophet Hosea speaks to the people of Israel, his warning to them is about what they pursue. In his case, the people of Israel have not been faithful to the God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, the God of Moses who led them out of Egypt, but they have run after other gods, they have pursued easier gods, gods who would give them what they thought they wanted, and so Hosea tells them what the natural consequences of that pursuit will be. And unfortunately that's what comes to pass for the nation of Israel. The old kingdom of David and Solomon has split into two halves, Israel in the north and Judah in the south. Israel continues to be unfaithful to God and worshiping the storm god Baal. During Hosea's time there were a series of political assassinations and the kingdom was in turmoil. The nation wanted security. Where would they find it? Some of the kings were constantly pressured to seek alliances with Egypt or with Assyria and they were caught between the two powerful nations. What would they do? What would they pursue? Material wealth, political power, stability at any cost? All of

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<sup>1</sup> Johnson, Elisabeth. Commentary on Luke 12:13-21. *WorkingPreacher.org*. August 4, 2013.



those are gods that tempt us as well. What things do we pursue? Is the most important thing to us our financial well being? Do we judge our success on whether we got a raise this year? Do we judge our church by our balance sheet? Do we judge our nation by our budget deficit? All of those things are important, but are they goals or are they gods? Do we pursue them to the exclusion of all else? Both of our passages today are about things we pursue.

I hope you noticed the ending of the passage in Hosea. For right after showing them their judgment, the voice of God changes: how can I give you up, O Ephraim? How can I hand you over, O Israel. These are the words of our God who even when we don't pursue him, even when we are selfish, this is the God who pursues us. This is an old story.

The scholar and pastor Stacy Simpson Duke says: At the core this is one of the oldest stories there is. It first gets told in Genesis. It gets told in a thousand different ways throughout the passages of the Bible. God loves us, entirely. God creates us, delivers us, and tends us. The more God pursues, the more we turn away. It is the story of our shame. It is the story of God's grace. We know how the story ends—God does not give up.<sup>2</sup> This is not the story of the prodigal son, who having struggled with bad choices, finally comes to his senses and returns home. This the story of the prodigal God—who in anguish, heartbreak, and fiercest love—comes seeking the children who have strayed. The last image is the lion who roars, and the children, like cubs hearing their mother's voice, come trembling home. I hope that you hear that call also. As we constantly pursue other gods, God never gives up pursuing us and calling us to come home. And sooner or later we learn, that our security, our real security, is not in things, not in the accumulation of wealth, but in the constant, never-ending, never changing love of God.

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<sup>2</sup> Duke, Stacy Simpson. *Feasting On The Word. Year C, vol. 3.* p. 292.