

They call this the parable of the “Rich Fool” -
but does he look much different than we do from time to time?

Did you know that there are now more than 30,000
self-storage facilities in the country
offering a billion square feet for people to store their stuff?

In the 1960’s this industry did not exist.
We sometimes forget what is in our storage units.
It can seem overwhelming.

The problem with this guy
was not his storage units (his barns) but that he could not see past them.
He could not see past his own possessions.

We think we need something.
We are convinced of how it will make our life better.
And that happens over and over and over.
Then we are distracted by all those things we need to take care of.

I saw a list of “Nowhere but in America.....and that sentence is completed in several ways.

One of those statements was – “Nowhere but in America...
do we have a fine expensive automobile – that sits in the driveway
because the garage is full of junk.”

We often talk about spiritual growth.
We want spiritual growth. We want transformation.

But – what is it?

What book can I read so that I will have it?

Oh – there are lots of books.

They often get lost in all the stuff.

In churches we often talk about stewardship - and really we should talk about it all the time.

It has to do with stuff - the things that fill our lives – our world - how we manage them
and sort out what is important - how we care for important things.

Sometimes we don't give as much time to relationships
with those we love as we do to other things.

It is hard to discover purpose
in the larger sense – until we consider carefully -
our relationship to our possessions and our desires.

I want to tell you another story.

It is a little like the story Jesus told - but different.¹



Two men – both seriously ill – occupied the same hospital room.

One man was allowed to sit up in his bed
for an hour each afternoon to help drain the fluid from his lungs.

His bed was next to the room's only window.

The other man had to spend all his time flat on his back.

The men talked for hours on end.

They spoke of their wives and families -
their homes – their jobs – their involvement in the military –
where they had been on vacation.

And every afternoon

when the man in the bed by the window could sit up -
he would pass the time by describing to his roommate
all the things he could see outside the window.

The man in the other bed began to live for those one-hour periods
where his world would be broadened and enlivened
by all the activity and color of the world outside.

The window overlooked a park with a lake.
Ducks and swans played on the water while children sailed their model boats.
Young lovers walked arm in arm amidst flowers of every color of the rainbow.

Grand old trees graced the landscape -
and a fine view of the city skyline could be seen in the distance.

As the man by the window
described all this in exquisite detail - the man on the other side of the room
would close his eyes and imagine the picturesque scene.

One warm afternoon the man by the window described a parade passing by.
Although the other man couldn't hear the band – he could see it in his mind's eye
as the gentleman by the window portrayed it with descriptive words.

Then unexpectedly – a sinister thought entered his mind.
Why should the other man alone experience all the pleasures
of seeing everything - while he himself never got to see anything?

It didn't seem fair. The man felt ashamed – at first.

But as the days passed and he missed seeing more sights -
his envy eroded into resentment and soon turned him sour.

He began to brood and he found himself unable to sleep.

He should be by that window –
That thought – and only that thought now controlled his life.

Late one night as he lay staring at the ceiling - the man by the window began to cough.

He was choking on the fluid in his lungs.

The other man watched in the dimly lit room
as the struggling man by the window groped for the button to call for help.

Listening from across the room he never moved – never pushed his own button
which would have brought the nurse running in.

In less than five minutes the coughing and choking stopped –
along with that the sound of breathing.

Now there was only silence – dead silence.

The following morning the day nurse arrived to bring water for their baths.
When she found the lifeless body of the man by the window - she was saddened
and called the hospital attendants to take his body away.

As soon as it seemed appropriate –
the other man asked if he could be moved next to the window.

The nurse was happy to make the switch -
and after making sure he was comfortable – she left him alone.

Slowly – painfully – he propped himself up on one elbow
to take his first look at the world outside.

Finally – he would have the joy of seeing it all himself.
He strained to slowly turn to look out the window beside the bed.

It faced a blank wall.

The man asked the nurse what could have compelled his deceased roommate
to describe such wonderful things outside this window?

The nurse responded that the man was blind.

He couldn't even see the wall.

She said – "Perhaps he just wanted to encourage you."

End of story.



Is there anything about this man flat on his back
on the inside of the hospital room away from the window
that is like our "rich fool"?

Was it greed gone wild - or expediency – to get his desires met – envy?

Well – yes.

Those two emotions use up a lot of energy. They can consume us.

What we acquire out of greed or envy really owns us.

Not the other way around.

But there was something else.

And that is our inability to see over – through – and beyond
our initial desires for what we think we need - to discover generosity.

Generosity seems to be more of a divine attribute -

that will better fulfill our lives -

It is a kind of grace – perhaps a part of grace.

We just have to be able to see through the illusion about all the stuff.

And when we are too wrapped up in what should be ours -
because we think we deserve it – or someone else does not -
we continue to be blind to the world on the other side of greed -
the other side of envy.

I call this a quest to see through illusion -
to see through the illusion of security - to see through this illusion
that we are in this world to serve ourselves.

It takes seeing through that illusion
to invest in timeless things - relationships with those we love -
or creating and extending good for others -
extending the work of our hearts far into the future.



In the next several weeks and months
I will be asking you – our capital campaign committee -
will be inviting you to invest in this church.

I want to ask you to invest in this church
because we want to be about growing souls around here
way into our second century.

We want to be more about timeless things -
like exploring the real value of our lives -
like learning to experience the deep love of Christ -

like learning how to extend the reach of our hearts
across the street and across the ocean –

like extending that message of hope
to those who enter our doors for recovery and for self-discovery.

like keeping this progressive Christian message
going in this sacred space – for a long time.

I am inviting you to invest in that.

It takes a strong building
and committed congregation to do those things.
And this building has been strong -
but at 120 years it needs restoration in some places.
We all need restoration in some places.



Socrates said, "I go around doing nothing
but persuading both young and old not to care for your body or your wealth
in preference to your soul.

We often think the soul part of it will take care of itself - but it doesn't.

That's why we talk about stewardship in church - just not enough.

The sin of the "Rich Fool" was in his lack of imagination - his lack of vision.

He couldn't see through his own illusion – to the bigger picture.

The same was true of the envious man.

Jesus teaches us to look beyond what we see -
to imagine better realities - and help create them.

They don't happen on their own.
So – we want to learn from the guy building barns -
who could not see past them.

We want to learn not to be distracted by all the stuff.

¹ This story was told by Rev. Michael Battle, Ph.D., assistant professor of spirituality and black church studies at Duke University Divinity School, in a sermon entitled "Possessed by a Thing."