

St. Andrew's Episcopal Church
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Proper 13 Year C

Barns are fascinating buildings to a lot of people, and that includes me.

Some of them are huge and tower above all the other surrounding buildings. Some of them up in New England are attached to houses so that in the dead of winter, farmers do not have to go outside into the elements to tend the cattle. Barns throughout many parts of the country have signs painted on them, such as Mail Pouch Chewing Tobacco, See Rock City, or Jesus Saves!

I imagine the barns I pass on the way to church are places for conception, birthing, living and dying. They house the cows that provide our area with milk. They are storehouses for the earth's bounty. They are places for stripping and drying tobacco. They are places of sustenance and safety for many forms of livestock: goats, sheep, pigs and chickens. I sense these barns I drive by each day are at the very heart and soul of the farms which dot our tranquil landscape here in the Cumberland Valley.

The closest I ever came to living on a farm was regularly visiting my grandparents, my mother's parents, who lived on a small farmette, with the "lower 40", an area designated for crops, a chicken coop up on the hill, goats in the pasture, and swallows which captivated my attention with their diving flight patterns, especially as the evening insects appeared. So I don't know for certain, but my best guess is that the life in and around the barns I pass each day is very much about living in the present with what comes into being each day. Not, that the future is totally ignored, but that it is not paramount. And, although being able to pay the bills is definitely important, becoming rich isn't even on the radar screen of life for most of the local farmers. I have the sense that this is true for the Mennonite farmers at whose farm stand I stop nearly every day on the way home from work, who said yesterday, "We really need the rain."

And yet I imagine, for some of the larger commercial farmers near to us, it can become too easy to become focused on the profit margin – the bottom-line. It can become easy to simply see the soil, the produce and animals as nothing more than the means to the end of making money. How distant they must live from their role as co-creators and caretakers with and for God and of our earth's bounty. Their actions and lives, I imagine, have become distorted, caring more about extracting the earth's resources for personal and financial gain, rather than entering into this holy relationship between ourselves, each other, and God's creation.

If not careful, all of us can become intoxicated by a greediness of personal consumption that impairs our ability to see the cause and effects of our actions, to break our covenant relationship with the earth, and to disregard our call toward honoring the abundance of the earth's resources, designed to care for and sustain all.

In the Gospel of Luke, the proper use of material goods, the holding properly of the resources given to us by God's bounty, the inverse connection between material wealth and spiritual poverty is a major theme. Oddly, it seems only natural that we want to build our containers, bigger and better, to fill them with possessions, accumulations of wealth of all kinds, and to attach our identity to the grandeur of what we can own. And yet Luke's Jesus warns us that this is slippery path to wander down, not necessarily because being rich in and of itself is inherently wrong. But because what stands out with the rich man is his total disregard for God and anyone other than himself, and that's so easy for us to allow this to happen, when our barn is filled with bounty. As far as the rich man is concerned it's all about himself.

As we hear him speaking to himself he says: What should **I** do for **I** have no place to store **my** crops? **I** will do this: **I** will pull down **my** barns...and there **I** will store all **my** grain and **my** goods. And **I** will say to **my** soul..." There are 6 "**I**'s" & 5 "**My**'s"!

Know anybody like that?? That it's all about them? I imagine we all do.

This repetition of first-person words is surely intentional. Through the language alone, the point is hammered home: no one exists for this man but himself.

He has no family. He has no heirs. He has no friends. He is closed off, blind to anyone other than himself. And, yes, he is blind to the existence of God.

He doesn't recognize that the abundance of his crops is a blessing from God. He doesn't give any thought to sharing his abundance with the community and those less fortunate. He only wants to engage in self-indulgence. He epitomizes the deadly sins of avarice and gluttony.

In his self-intoxicated state of mind, he is so clouded that he's willing to destroy his standing barns, instead of just building additional ones. He's willing to tear down his existing barns for the anticipated bumper crop.

Does that remind you of the nonsense of our brand-new McDonalds down the street, where they pulled down a perfectly good structure to replace it with one not so different, just to anticipate new customers, or to properly compete with the new Burger King further down the street, when they never ever stopped to consider the resources from the earth it would take to create the new unneeded one? It appears they had become intoxicated by a greediness of business consumption that impaired their ability to see the cause and effects of their actions, to break their covenant relationship with the earth, and to disregard our call toward honoring the abundance of the earth's resources, designed to care for and sustain all.

The man in our story is also so busy looking to the future that he cannot see the reality before him. He cannot see the reality that he has more than he can possibly use for himself and he is unable to share it with God and his neighbors.

God is so absent from the rich man's mind that he thinks he's all powerful and can control the future: I **will** do this: I **will** pull down my barns...and there I **will** store all my grain and my goods. And I **will** say to my soul..."

The greedy rich and powerful man speaks to the future, but the generous God speaks to the present.

The great "I AM" - God who is "Being Itself" says, "You fool! This very night your soul is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?"

The God of Being, the God of generosity calls - demands - that people be aware of their neighbors.

The God of Being is the antithesis of the God of Self.

Oh, if only this were easy to understand and internalize! For this is the pathway our Christian life leads us upon. We are called to tear down our barns, to give our possessions away, to rely upon God, not ourselves. This can be very frightening. And we can be consumed with grief as we release our grip on those things which mean something to us, which have become a part of our identity, and without which we may wonder if we're whole and true any longer.

For the truth is that it's easy for us to turn from God as the center of our lives when we get tired and worn down, or we're scared and confused. It's all too easy for us to slip away from being centered on God and into greedy behavior or other forms of idolatry.

It's all too easy for some of us to get into binge shopping for the rush of having something new or to add yet another edition of some collectable to add to the clutter in our lives. It can be all too easy to skip our Morning Prayers to watch the morning news or get consumed in answering emails.

It's just too easy to try and fill in the holes of our lives with things other than God and then wonder what happened when we fall into one of those holes.

Yet, over and over again we learn from the tradition of the church and each other's experiences that when we keep God at the center of our lives things work better. When we follow the way of Christ, life works better!

Things work better because we become more aware of how precious our limited amount of time on earth is. Things work better because we become more aware of those around us and their needs and desires. Things work better as we focus more on God and less on the self-inflicted things that trip us up.

Yet, we do live in a culture that bombards us minute by minute and day by day telling us that we need more of this or that. We are told over and over again that happiness is fundamentally found

in the accumulation of more stuff. Our whole economic system is based on creating the desire of consumers to possess more, needed or not.

Our faith tells us to live one way but our economic system and our government challenges us to live quite the opposite.

It's not that money and the things that we have are bad, but it's important for us to know when enough is enough; and to share generously, not just our excess, but that which matters to us, with God and God's people. For when we do, we are rich toward God. And that is everything. It is what brings us joy. It is what draws us into a place of hope. It is what moves us toward peace deep within our souls. It is what opens our eyes to beauty around us. It is what makes us all filled up with love. The desire to give generously to others is the greatest gift God offers us. I believe our Lord has hard wired our hearts to find our real happiness in loving God and God's people. If we look for fulfillment in money, it's not going to work. So let us tear down our barns, not to build newer and larger ones, but to empty the containers of our lives, to "thin out" our lives, to rid ourselves of the obstacles that prevent us from relying upon God, so that the Kingdom of God can become real, in our lives and in our world.

Amen.