

Holy Cross, Daggett and St. Mark, Wallace Lutheran Churches, Michigan

August 4, 2013

Luke 12:13-21

Someone in the crowd said to him, "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me." Jesus replied, "Man, who appointed me a judge or an arbiter between you?" Then he said to them, "Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; a man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions." And he told them this parable: "The ground of a certain rich man produced a good crop. He thought to himself, 'What shall I do? I have no place to store my crops.'

"Then he said, 'This is what I'll do. I will tear down my barns and build bigger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I'll say to myself, "You have plenty of good things laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry.'" "But God said to him, 'You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?' "This is how it will be with anyone who stores up things for himself but is not rich toward God."

What makes you happy? Many different things make many different people happy. Maybe going places makes you happy. We went several places during Vacation Bible School this past week which make people happy. We went to places with lots of natural beauty by visiting the Grand Canyon and the Rocky Mountains. We went to places with manmade beauty by visiting the St. Louis Arch and Statue of Liberty. We even went to the self-proclaimed happiest place on earth: Walt Disney World.

Sure, going places makes some happy, but going a certain place doesn't make everyone happy. I guess my examples point to the fact that happiness is an individual thing. It varies and changes from person to person. Wordreference.com defines happiness: it is a feeling, showing, or expressing joy; pleased. Causing joy or gladness. Some of us might be happy sitting at home reading a book. Others might be happy doing stuff.

Yet, I wonder how often do we find something which makes us truly happy? How often do we find something which brings us unrestrained joy or gladness? Our gospel lesson today draws attention to one way we sometimes try to find joy. "The ground of a certain rich man produced a good crop. He thought to himself, 'What shall I do? I have no place to store my crops.' Then he said, 'This is what I'll do. I will tear down my barns and build bigger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods.'"

"And I'll say to myself, 'You have plenty of good things laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry.'" Jesus tells us about a rich man. He owns a lot of land and this land produces a good crop. This crop is so big and so great that this rich man doesn't know what to do with it. But it doesn't take him long to realize what he can do. He can rip down his old barns, build new ones and retire. He can take life easy because he won't have to work anymore. Sounds pretty good, huh?

I see a lot of us in the rich man and the story of his pursuit of happiness. I will read it again and see if you can pick up on what I mean. "The ground of a certain rich man produced a good crop. He thought to himself, 'What shall I do? I have no place to store my crops.' Then he said, 'This is what I'll do. I will tear down my barns and build bigger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods.' And I'll say to myself, 'You have plenty of good things laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry.'"

Did you pick up on why we have a lot in common with the rich man? All the rich man wanted was to be happy. He felt he had the right to be happy and he could use this right anyway he saw fit as long as it made him happy. He figured the best way to pursue this right to be happy was to eat, drink and live the good life. Do you ever find yourself trapped by thinking you have the right to be happy all the time? Do you ever find yourself held hostage by the thought you deserve to be happy all the time?

Wait, what did you say pastor? Did you say finding happiness is a trap or holds us hostage? Maybe you should take a history lesson. I'm an American and our Declaration of Independence says, "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness." I'm not trapped by the pursuit of happiness. I'm not held hostage by it. It is my right to be happy.

Does this attitude sound familiar? Does it feel familiar? It would for the rich man. He would say all he wanted was to be happy in life. It sounds familiar for our American culture. Time and again we hear

people say, "All I want is to feel happy. I deserve this because it makes me feel happy. How can it be wrong if it makes me so happy?" What does God think about this attitude and desire to feel happy over and above anything else?

"But God said to him, 'You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?' This is how it will be with anyone who stores up things for himself but is not rich toward God." God calls this blind pursuit of happiness at all costs foolish and anyone who pursues happiness at all costs a fool. Why? Because the person who pursues happiness at all costs makes the pursuit of happiness their god.

We spend a lot of time chasing happiness. Some of us chase happiness through sports like baseball, football, golf or fishing. Some of us chase happiness through family activities like camping or family vacations. Some of us chase happiness through work. Some of us chase happiness through eating or drinking. These activities aren't bad in and of themselves, but what happens when the pursuit of happiness replaces our time with God?

What happens if our pursuit of happiness keeps us away from church for a few weeks? Than months? Should we brush it off? Say, "Ah, it doesn't matter. I'm fine. My relationship with God hasn't changed. He knows where I stand and I know where he stands. I'll chase my dreams and come back to him when I'm happy and fulfilled." What would God think of this attitude? Do you think he takes our time away from him as lightly as we do?

"But God said to him, 'You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?' This is how it will be with anyone who stores up things for himself but is not rich toward God." God calls us fools and rightly so because we've replaced him with our own god of pursuing happiness. We've become trapped and are being held hostage by the pursuit of happiness. It is putting our souls in danger.

How do we break free from the trap and gain release from god of the pursuit of happiness? We live a life which is rich in God. Jesus draws a contrast for us with the rich man. The rich man shows us a man who isn't rich in God. He encourages us to live a life which is rich with God's love. God's love starts when the Holy Spirit leads us to the realization that God needs to be first in everything in our life. God can do this in many different ways.

He can do this by using someone to come and point out our sin to us just like I did with our previous examples. He can do this by frustrating our pursuit of happiness and not allowing us to find happiness and contentment. He could do this by allowing a sickness or disease into our life. Why would he do all of these things? He uses them to show us how empty the blind pursuit of happiness is without the richness of his love.

Now, God wants us to remind us about what richness in him means. Richness in God means we remember how Jesus didn't become trapped by the goal of pursuing happiness here on earth. We remember he wasn't held hostage by the idea of eating, drinking and being merry. He had one and only

one pursuit here on earth. His pursuit wasn't his earthly happiness. His pursuit was our eternal happiness.

The only way Jesus could win our eternal happiness was by giving his life for us. He couldn't win our eternal happiness by creating national parks. He couldn't win it by building the most beautiful buildings ever. He couldn't win it by taking us to Disney World. He had to come into this world and lay down his life for us. He had to put us first in every pursuit he had here on earth. He refused to be trapped or held hostage by anything else because he knew if he did it would mean our eternal death.

The richness of God doesn't end with Jesus' death. It ends with his life. Jesus took up his life again so we could live forever in the richness of his love. What does the richness of Jesus' love provide for us? Happiness. We heard about it in our first lesson today, "A man can do nothing better than to eat and drink and find satisfaction in his work. This too, I see, is from the hand of God, for without him, who can eat or find enjoyment? To the man who pleases him, God gives wisdom, knowledge and happiness."

The Holy Spirit makes us wise and knowledgeable about the richness of God's love because Jesus has removed God's wrath over our sin. This wisdom and knowledge brings us true happiness because of our riches in Christ. The riches of Christ assure us we have complete peace and unity with God. Does this mean we will always wear a smile on our face and always be happy when we live a life filled with God's riches? No, it doesn't. Life is hard. Life is a mess. Life beats us up and spits us out sometimes.

But why would life be this hard for those who are rich in Christ? Why would it beat us up and spit us out? It is because we live in a sinful world and we all have a sinful nature which loves to sin. Sin brings hardships in this world and our sinful nature brings them on to us. Our sinful nature robs us of the riches of Christ and leads us to blindly pursue happiness at all costs. Our sinful nature needs to be countered by our new self which loves to lead a life rich in God.

How can we live lives which are rich in God? Put him first in everything. This might not bring happiness right now. It might hurt our feelings to get cut from a sports team because we refuse to skip worship. It requires sacrifice to make coming to worship a priority over going camping. It requires courage to fight against the trap and being held hostage by society's pursuit of happiness. But when we live lives rich in God it gives us lasting happiness.

We can go to the Grand Canyon or Rocky Mountains, but they won't last forever. We can go to the St. Louis Arch or the Statue of Liberty, though they'll need repairs or to be replaced someday. We can go to Disney World, but it doesn't mean we'll be happy. Contrast that with richness in God. It brings us happiness which will never perish, spoil or fade. Richness in God brings us the eternal happiness of heaven. Amen.