

Fairness Fatigue
A Sermon for Sardis Baptist Church
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7-31-2016
Luke 12:13-21

Several weeks ago, we visited the home of Mary and Martha. A tension arose, because one sister, Martha, was irritated that the other sister, Mary, wasn't doing her chores. Or as the poem Joe and Betty recited for us suggested: Martha thought that Mary was "sitting around on her salvation."

"Tell her to do her fair share, Jesus," Martha asked. Jesus gently reminded Martha that her tasks, though not unimportant, and certainly not unnecessary, were distracting her from the better things: God's presence.

In today's lection, another sibling rivalry ensues. And today, it's a common issue. Two brothers are squabbling over their inheritance. It seems that an older brother is reluctant to distribute an equitable portion to his younger brother. And the younger brother says to Jesus, "Tell my brother to give me my fair share."

Jesus will have none of it. "Friend," he says, "Who set me to be a judge or arbitrator over you?"

In today's story, I think Jesus is experiencing fairness fatigue.

Can you imagine the scene? Jesus is getting the crowd all ramped up, and he's just about ready to hit 'em with the good stuff: love and grace, and maybe he'll work in a few lines from the beatitudes, throw the crowd a classic parable, and see if it sticks. They'll be shoutin' amens and hallelujahs in no time!

Jesus is full of the Holy Spirit. And he's ready to talk about God's in-breaking realm, an economy based on the idea of enough-ness. In God's world, love and grace are not exhaustible commodities. He's explaining to the crowd that when we embrace the enough-ness of God's presence, we free ourselves from clinging to things that only have measurable value. When we embrace the enough-ness of God, we don't worry about what we don't have, or how much more our neighbors have, but rather, we acknowledge the abundance of God's presence. In God's economy, empathy and compassion are the derivatives of enough-ness. And when we care for one another, our needs are met organically.

But like I said, Jesus is experiencing fairness fatigue. For in his presence, Israel does not acknowledge the abundance of spirit, but rather, sisters squabble over chores, disciples wonder about seats of honor, church leaders agonize over policy, and brothers fight over daddy's inheritance.

St. Augustine would say that Jesus is around too many people who cling to an earthly love, a love of things that distract them from God's presence, instead of clinging to a divine love, a love that sets their focus squarely on God.

But lucky for us Jesus is not impatient, nor does he teach theology or philosophy at an esteemed university. So he doesn't give them a thirty-minute recap of Augustine's *The City of God*.

First, Jesus offers a stern warning to the crowd: "Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions."

And then Jesus illustrates this point by doing what he does best. He tells a story:

Imagine a man. Some would call him a farmer, but that's not quite accurate. He knows how to farm, but he owns more land than the average farmer. He's a member of the planter aristocracy. His lands stretch as far as the eye can see and even then some. If he had lived in the Antebellum-era South, perhaps Margaret Mitchell would have written about him. This dude has land. And wealth. And more resources than you can imagine.

And his lands produce abundantly. In other words, his crops don't just live, they thrive. He's got state-fair-winning produce along every row. He enjoys the kind of harvest that could fulfill the needs of a thousand families. Perhaps Dos Equis will create an advertising campaign about him. This man is a winner. Surely, God has blessed this man and all he touches.

One day, this man begins to survey his crops, and he thinks to himself: "What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?" In other words, what shall I do with all this abundance?

And this man gets to thinking, (and that should probably be our first hint of trouble). But anyway, he continues to look around his properties, and he notices that his barns sure do look awfully small. I mean it's like having broom closets when you need walk-in closets. All this stuff isn't gonna store itself.

So the man makes a few calculations in his head, and he determines the rough amount of additional square footage he'll need. And as his eyes scan the horizon, he imagines the new barns that will dot the landscape, and he imagines the riches that will fill them. He imagines his workers trying to close the doors of his grain silos with their shoulders – there's so much abundance it's bursting at the seams. And he can envision a great hall filled with shiny, precious things, a monument to all of his accomplishments.

And a rush of satisfaction sweeps over him, and he says to himself: "I will say to my soul, Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years – Look at all this you have accomplished. Look at all this that is yours. Now, relax, eat, drink, and be merry. Life's gonna be a party!"

But no sooner does the man finish this thought, than God says to him, "You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?"

And so our friend meets a tragic end: he'll never get the chance to enjoy what he's spent a lifetime accumulating.

At the close of the parable, Jesus tells the crowd: "So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich with God."

So what does this mean? What's Jesus trying to tell us?

Jesus is NOT scolding those who have retirement savings. Jesus is NOT frowning upon those who have deep freezers in their garage, or canned summer vegetables in their pantries, or children who deposit pennies in their pigs, or families who own life-insurance policies. Jesus is NOT condemning the wealthy, nor is Jesus frowning on those who enjoy luxury.

Here's what Jesus is critiquing: Greed and apathy. Jesus frowns on those who hoard abundance. The rich farmer's entire value system is inwardly-focused. He gathers his resources without gratitude for the God that provides such abundance, without acknowledgement of the sharecroppers he's exploited to accumulate his wealth, and without any intention to use such resources to better the lives of his neighbors.

Joseph stored up seven years of grain. He used this surplus to steer Egypt through a famine. The rich farmer stores up grain like it's a trophy

The Hebrew prophets proclaimed the year of Jubilee, that magical time when the harvest came in, when debts were forgiven, when lands were restored, and when abundance was realized by all of God's people. The rich farmer would just assume abundance rot than realize the Jubilee. Nor will he acknowledge it is God, not his vanity that makes the land thrive.

The rich farmer relies on Caesar's economy. His worth is defined by accumulation. Caesar's economy tells him to acquire and acquire and acquire. And so the rich farmer only lives his life pursuing things. And in such pursuit, he is too busy to recognize the beloved community.

Sardis Baptist Church, our challenge today is to avoid the temptation to let fairness consume us. We want our fair share: of nice things, of winning arguments, of last words, of acknowledgment for our hard work, of rest, of pay, of food, of drink, of power, of influence, of stuff, and on and on and on.

But if the pursuit of our fair share of treasures is all we seek, we will come up wanting. A better treasure awaits. God is in our midst. And God offers us a spirit that will fill us with love and compassion and empathy and joy. And should we choose to barter in such currency, God will offer us an economy big enough to meet all our needs.

It may not be fair, but it will most certainly be full. May it be so. Amen.