



Reflections by: Rev. Dr. Randy Bush  
Text: Luke 12:13-21

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### Tearing Down and Building Up

Some of you may remember Reader's Digest magazines and how they had a regular column called "Increase Your Word Power." You'd have a multiple-choice test to see if you could correctly define some obscure words. So here's your "word power" word for today: concupiscence. It's an old-timey word that basically means "an inclination to desire things that are forbidden or harmful." It is associated with strong and inappropriate desires that overwhelm us. The theologian Paul Tillich had a great definition for concupiscence. He said it was a "desire to cram the whole world into one's mouth."

Concupiscence is not the same as addiction. Addiction is when you don't have control over doing, taking, or using something to the point of self-harm. It's a disease, whether the focus of the addiction is drugs, pornography, alcohol, or gambling. Concupiscence is more like extreme gluttony or greed, taking in more than is proper, more than is healthy, cramming the world into your mouth.

It is precisely this type of greed that Jesus condemned in his parable of the rich fool. The problem wasn't that the man had a huge farm or that his crops had produced abundantly. The problem was what he wanted to do with his plentiful harvest. The rich man didn't live alone on a desert island. He was part of a community as well as a child of God. But no one else in heaven or on earth appears to have been on his mind as he surveyed his wealth. His response was, "I will tear down my current barns and build bigger ones, so that I can store all my grain and lay up my wealth to enjoy for years to come." In the "G" section of the dictionary, the rich fool chose greed and gluttony over generosity, grace, and gratitude to God.

Now, most of the time, Jesus didn't have to talk about greed. He wasn't wealthy himself and neither was his audience. He usually shared words of encouragement like these (Luke 6): *Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled.* But on this particular day, someone from the crowd had shouted out to him, "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me." In ancient times, Jewish rabbis were often called upon to settle legal disputes. It appears that a younger son had called out to Jesus because he was anxious to get his share of a deceased father's estate. But Jesus sensed something was amiss with this request.

Turning to the crowd, he said, "Beware! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed. Life doesn't consist in the abundance of possessions." Or, as Tillich said, happiness isn't

attained when you cram the whole world into your mouth. If concupiscence is a symptom of spiritual trouble, anxiety is its deeper pathology. Anxiety caused the young man to call out to Jesus about getting his share of the family inheritance. And anxiety was likely behind the rich fool's decision to tear down his barns and build bigger ones, so that he'd have enough for himself, so for years to come he could, as he put it, "relax, eat, drink, and be merry."

Anxiety is part of the universal human condition. None of us is immune to it. The story is told about some orphans during World War II who had endured horrific things before finding safety in a refugee camp. But the staff had trouble getting them to sleep at night. Then they discovered that if the children were given a piece of bread to hold at bedtime, they would sleep through the night. The bread reassured them with the thought, "Today I ate and I will eat again tomorrow." Sleeping with bread at night gave them hope for the morning. It helped ease their anxiety.<sup>1</sup>

Concupiscence and anxiety. Jesus warns us to be on guard against the sin of greed, against storing up treasures for ourselves while not being rich toward God. Now, if I'd read a little bit more of Luke 12, the next thing Jesus said to the crowd was this: *Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat, or about your body, what you will wear. For life is more than food, and the body more than clothing...The nations of the world strive after all these things, and your Father knows that you need them. Instead, strive for God's kingdom, and these things will be given to you as well.* (Lk 12:22-23,30-31)

How do we move from being rich fools, motivated by greed, to being Christ's followers, motivated by faith? Surprisingly, the verbs in the parable Jesus told show us the way. When informed about his bumper crops, the rich fool decided he needed to tear down and then build up his barns. For us as well, choosing the kingdom of God over the kingdom of the world involves tearing down and building up. What are the personal barns we've built to quiet our anxieties? Do we have barns that hold false versions of ourselves in which our worth is tied to our wealth? Do we have silos that store up our old grudges, our prejudices and wounds? We save lots of things that bring us no joy. Christ tells us to tear down these barns, to let light shine into our places of shadow, to remember that life is so much more than food and clothing and social capital.

Darren Walker is the CEO of the Ford Foundation, an African American leader who wrote a powerful book called From Generosity to Justice. In it, he talked about the things we store up for ourselves, especially the narratives we cling to about how we achieved success all on our own in this world. But in telling ourselves these stories, we forget to factor in the aspects of privilege that helped us succeed – variables like our parents' place of origin; our parents' education or command of the English language; our birth order, body type, or athletic ability; our relationship to written and spoken words; our religious or ethnic background, our skin color, our zip code.<sup>2</sup> Taking an honest inventory of the privilege that shaped our life is part of how we tear down the

false barns that keep us from being people of real faith. It involves asking about the privileges we take for granted while considering the things that others in our community are confronting on a daily basis but that we don't have to worry about at all. Tearing down the barns of false privilege provides the wisdom we need in order to know what must be built up to replace them.

Sadly, in the current political and economic system, some leaders are not only indifferent to questions of privilege; they are choosing to question the wisdom of our own nation's founding principles. Our Declaration of Independence opened with the proclamation that all men are created equal, endowed by their Creator with unalienable rights including life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Our Constitution was ratified for the express purpose of establishing justice, promoting the general welfare, and ensuring the blessing of liberty to ourselves and our posterity. This same constitution, in its 14<sup>th</sup> amendment, defined these liberties as being guaranteed to any child born on American soil, seeing them as full citizens of this nation – a direct refutation of the racism of the Civil War and the flawed Supreme Court ruling that had decreed an emancipated slave named Dred Scott could not sue in a federal court because, by being a black man, he had no claim to citizenship in America. Some politicians believe these historic standards of democracy are too generous. Some believe one's personal wealth is something to be hoarded, protected behind high border walls and federal policies that serve the interests of the few over the needs of the many.

All barns of injustice, privilege and concupiscence need to be torn down. The question is, do we have the courage to build up something better, something more faithful in their place? Jesus told the parable of the rich fool as a way to highlight the anxiety at the heart of our flawed and greedy motivations. We are finite beings; we live and we die – and the anxiety over this fact moves us to do things that may provide short-term comfort but no long-term peace. As Christ said in another setting, "What good is it to gain the whole world yet lose your soul?"

But Christ did not stop with the parable of the rich fool. He offered building instructions for a faithful future. He spoke about ridding ourselves of anxiety as best we can, remembering that life is more than food and clothing. He has us consider the birds who have neither warehouses nor barns, yet they are fed by God. And the lilies that neither toil nor spin, yet who are arrayed more beautifully than the richest kings. He ended that sermon with clear instructions on what to build up when he said "Remember: where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" (Lk 12:34)

In a few moments, we will celebrate the Lord's Supper. Like the children in the World War II refugee camp, you'll be given bread to eat. In place of the rich fool's barns, this vision of coming together to share this sacramental meal is part of what has been built up in the name of Christ for the healing of the world. The act of coming together to eat this bread and drink this cup is what sustains us for the important work of tearing

down and building up. In place of concupiscence, we now have another C-word: communion. Add that sacramental word to your vocabulary and let it define who we are and all we do in the days ahead. AMEN

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<sup>1</sup> Sleeping with Bread: Holding What Gives You Life, Dennis, Sheila and Matthew Linn, 1995.

<sup>2</sup> From Generosity to Justice, Darren Walker, p. 25.