

<sup>13</sup>Someone in the crowd said to him, "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me." <sup>14</sup>But he said to him, "Friend, who set me to be a judge or arbitrator over you?" <sup>15</sup>And he said to them, "Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed, for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions." <sup>16</sup>Then he told them a parable: "The land of a rich man produced abundantly. <sup>17</sup>And he thought to himself, 'What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?' <sup>18</sup>Then he said, 'I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. <sup>19</sup>And I will say to my soul, Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.' <sup>20</sup>But God said to him, 'You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?' <sup>21</sup>So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God."

**Response to the Word**

One: This is the Word of God for the people of God.

**All: Thanks be to God!**

Luke 12:13-21

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"Knowing Enough"

Rev. Amy Terhune

"A 6th grade teacher posed the following story-problem to her arithmetic classes: "A wealthy man dies and leaves ten million dollars. One-fifth is to go to his wife, one-fifth is to go to his son, one-sixth to his butler, and the rest to charity. Now, what does each get?"

"After a very long silence in the classroom, little Joey raised his hand, and the teacher called on him for his answer. With complete sincerity in his voice, Joey answered, "A lawyer!"

"He's probably right. Where there is a will, there is often a lawsuit. Someone in the crowd listening to Jesus said to him, "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me." [3 ¶s adapted from "Drowning in a Sea of Stuff" by King Duncan, [www.Sermons.com](http://www.Sermons.com).]

Now, the last thing Jesus wants to be is a lawyer—no offense to lawyers intended. It's just that this isn't Jesus' thing. Rather, Jesus is concerned about souls, and he warns this young man: Be on your guard against all kinds of greed! A warning that I think is justified, but we'll get back to that. First, understand something: in ancient Jewish law, the oldest son got 2/3rds of the father's property and assets when the father died. The other sons had to divide the other third. That's not fair, you say? You're right, it's not. But it was the law, and everybody knew it. Fairness was not a highly valued right back then. Tell my brother to divide the inheritance. Scholars seem to agree that this request is probably voiced by a second son who, very likely, wants more than his allotted share. He is egocentric enough to ask Jesus to make an exception to the rules on his behalf.

Now maybe you think Jesus should have spoken out about such an unfair law. I wish he had, if I'm being honest. But it seems pretty clear to me that Jesus was far more concerned with the state of this man's soul. This is not to say that Jesus is indifferent to questions of justice. On the contrary, Jesus has enormous concern for issues of justice. We see it in his interactions with Pharisees and with the marginalized of his society. But a just society depends on healthy, holy individuals. What he sees in this young man is a kind of narcissism which will ultimately interfere with his ability to harness the power of God and truly impact the world. Be on your guard against all kinds of greed, Jesus warned. In

the third chapter of Colossians, Paul writes that we should “put to death whatever in us is earthly: fornication, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed (which is idolatry).” Greed is idolatry—putting something else in the place of God, namely wealth. And the warning is as potent for us today as it was for that young man of long ago. Are you interested in a just world? A fair world? God’s kingdom manifest on the earth? Then one must begin with oneself.

So he tells the parable about the foolish farmer. Notice, it’s not the parable about the extravagant farmer, or the wicked farmer, or even the sinful farmer. He’s the foolish farmer. Jesus doesn’t condemn this farmer for being successful, for having money or for even for wanting to eat, drink, and be merry. But he calls him a fool. Which begs the question: Why? Why is he a fool? He’s played the commodities market well, made smart choices that paid good dividends. He has an excellent portfolio and financial savvy. He is what Wall Street might call wise. Jesus calls him a fool.

And he was a fool—in so many ways! He was a fool because he did not recognize his blessings for what they were! Notice what he says to himself: ‘What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?’ “Not true! He has barns.... His harvest has been so great that his present storage facilities will not hold all of the grain. So he decides, “I will tear down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain. Then and only then will I have ample goods to eat, drink and be merry.” Again, not true! He already has ample goods. He does not have to live in the moment. He has barns for his future... The man already has enough.... The point of the story is not that there is something wrong with amassing some wealth, but that he was intending to store it all by building bigger barns and storing it. He was called “foolish” because he did not recognize that his wealth had brought him happiness and that it could do the same for others if only it were not locked up in those bigger barns. His sin was not that he had become wealthy, but that he wanted to hoard all his wealth...” [adapted from W. Robert McClelland, *Fire In The Hole*, C.S.S Publishing Co., 1991; in illustrations for Luke 12, [www.Sermons.com](http://www.Sermons.com).]

Not only did he fail to recognize his blessings, but he totally missed the fact that it’s a blessing to share and to help others. “What shall I do?” he says to himself, and forthwith jumps to the conclusion that he’ll build bigger barns. The thought of sharing what’s left over doesn’t even occur to him. I entitled this sermon “Knowing Enough”, not because there’s a point where we know enough and can stop learning, but rather, because the whole concept of “enough” when it comes to money and stuff is not one this society seems to understand. We’re told that we can never have enough. But Jesus wouldn’t say that. We can have enough. We can have too much, to the point where it makes us apathetic, indifferent, insensitive, insulated, and unkind. Do you know what is “enough” – for you, for your family? Or is there just never enough, no matter how many raises or how much investment income? I can’t answer that for you. But it’s a question we each must wrestle with ourselves. How much is enough. When do we give up the quest for more in favor of sharing what is?

Actor Martin Sheen played the President of the United States on the popular television series *The West Wing*. Sheen was known as a hardworking professional on the set. But acting is only one priority in Martin Sheen's life. Sheen is a devout Roman Catholic who practices his faith every day in his social activism. Sheen is especially involved in ministries to the homeless. Once a week, he volunteers at a California restaurant for the homeless called Bread and Roses. He has become personally involved in the lives of some of the people he has met there. As he says, "Acting is what I do for a living, but my social justice work is how I stay alive." [from "Citizen Sheen" by Len Doucette, *Modern Maturity*, March-April 2000; as used in “Where Is Your Heart?” by King Duncan, [www.Sermons.com](http://www.Sermons.com).] Say what you will about him, Martin Sheen is no fool! The farmer in Jesus’

parable today had forgotten how to see his own blessings and others' needs, and Jesus called him a fool because of it.

But that's not the whole of it. "Secondly this man was a fool because he was egocentric—he overestimated his own value in the scheme of things. Listen to how he talked: I will store my grain, I will build bigger barns, I will say to my soul. In four short verses the rich man used the word "I" and "my" ten times. He did not see others as the source of his bounty, or even God, only himself. His error is not that he was a wealthy man. Rather, his foolishness lay in his superficiality and egotism.

"There are some states here in the US that prefer to call themselves commonwealths rather than states. Kentucky is one. So is Massachusetts. I like the term, because it reminds us that all wealth is really social in nature..." No one person amasses wealth alone—it always involves collaboration. What frightens me more than anything about trends in today's society is not the quest for transparency or to eliminate waste. Rather, it's the premise that bothers me—a subtle message that everything we make should be our own and individuals have no responsibility to pave roads, educate children, or provide for those in society who have not been as fortunate – that we don't owe each other anything. In Jesus' story, this narcissistic farmer is using the words 'I' and 'mine' as though he is the only one involved.

"In the movie *Shenandoah*, James Stewart plays a Virginia farmer during the Civil War years. He begins every meal with the same prayer: "Lord, I planted the seeds, I plowed the ground, I gathered in the harvest. If I hadn't of put the food on the table it wouldn't be here. But we thank you anyway."

We had all better understand the role of grace and mystery in life or we too might fall prey to the sin of thinking too highly of ourselves." [3 ¶s adapted from "Building Barns, Postponing Life" by Brett Blair & Staff, [www.Sermons.com](http://www.Sermons.com).] This farmer was a fool. He couldn't see the blessings in his life. He was narcissistic and self-focused. And so his stuff owned him. He couldn't share. He couldn't make a difference. He couldn't be a force for good. Nearly 30 years ago, Michael Douglas, portraying Gordon Gekko, stood before stockholders on Wall Street and said "greed is good." But Jesus said greed is bad—it'll take the wind from our sails, the courage from our conviction. It'll suck the very life from our veins. It'll play us for fools.

Let me finish today by telling you about a wise man instead. My former pastor, colleague, and friend Bill Ritter, tells a really touching story about Frank and Nellie Baker. In his time, Frank Baker was one of the great Methodist scholars. He was a true intellectual—one who could write wonderfully, lecture and preach, and he had a fabulous memory for historical detail. The wealth of knowledge he kept at his beck and call was formidable, to say the least.

Which is what made a diagnosis of Alzheimer's disease so devastating. He lived with the disease a long time before he died. The one consolation was that he remained peaceful throughout the disease and therefore, Nellie could care for him at home. Bill tells the story this way...

"Shortly after Greg Jones came to be Duke Divinity School's dean, he and his wife Susan paid a courtesy call on the Bakers. Without apology, Nellie welcomed them in, gave them tea and cookies, introduced them to Frank, and included her husband in the circle of conversation as if he could still participate. Which, of course, he couldn't. There he was, all dressed up, sitting in his wheelchair, with friends in the living room, but there was "nobody home", if you know what I mean. Which everybody overlooked out of kindness and respect. Although, on several occasions, Frank interrupted to say: "Now who did you say you were?"

"At last, the pot was drained of tea and the conversation was drained of pleasantries. Leading to good-byes from all but one. That one being Frank. When suddenly he broke into the conversation, clear as a bell, to say: "By the way, if you ever need anything to eat, stop by and we'll give you

whatever we have cooking on the stove." It was the most intelligent sentence he had said the entire hour. Heck, it was the only sentence he had said the entire hour. But it made wonderful sense. And it was warmly received.

"Only later did Greg and Susan learn that Frank and Nellie Baker had opened their home, and their dinner table, to scores of students across the years. Two and three nights a week, they had students over for dinner. And every Sunday they trolled the narthex of their Methodist church, finding strays who might like a warm and friendly place to have lunch. And every time volunteers were sought for a local soup kitchen or meal preparers were needed for the local homeless shelter, it was Frank who said: "I think Mother and I can do that."

Bill concluded his story this way: "Long after most of his mind was gone, most of the wires had been cut, most of the connections had wafted away with the wind, Frank Baker knew enough to invite a stranger to partake at his table. It was the case of the practice becoming the person and the habit taking over the man. When everything else was gone, that's what was left. [4 ¶s from "Kiss the Habit" by William A. Ritter, [www.Sermons.com](http://www.Sermons.com).] He had practiced it so thoroughly throughout his life that even when he couldn't draw his own name from his mind, he could draw out his essential nature as a generous child of a generous God.

Say what you will about the devastation Alzheimer's wrecks on the mind, Frank Baker, to his dying day, was no fool. Frank Baker, like Paul, had clothed his mind with the new self, which was renewed in knowledge according to the image of its creator. For Frank, and for you and I, too. It's about learning to see blessings and needs. It's about being part of community. It's about using a tool, leaving our hearts free to be possessed by the love of Christ who is all and in all! Thanks be to God. Amen.