

Open Up Your Storehouse

(Luke 12:13-21)

Sermon delivered by Matt Rhodes at St. George's Episcopal Church, Arlington, Virginia

The Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost, July 31, 2016

In the name of the God who creates, the Son who redeems, and the Holy Spirit that sustains.
Amen.

I have to confess something. When I was reading through today's Gospel passage, the voices that I heard echoed in the words of the first person confronting Jesus were those of my daughters. "Daddy, make her stop teasing me!" "Mommy, she said she would share her My Little Ponies with me and she isn't!" "She has more Pokémon cards than me and won't give me a few more." The range of responses from Amy and me, of course, varies from day to day – and sometimes from hour to hour. "Stop teasing her." "Share the ponies and cards." And there are the rare instances when we simply sigh and say, "Please work it out among yourselves."

How would they react in these moments, though, if we were to reply with the words of Jesus? "Friend, who set me to be a judge or arbitrator over you?" I think, of course, they would look at us like we were crazy, which is in itself a way of ending disputes and bringing the two of them together. But we could also possibly explain to them, the way Jesus tried to explain to those around him, why it was important to share what we have today because we don't know what tomorrow holds.

Yes, for me this situation with our daughters has a bit of a familiar echo in today's Gospel. But the settings are far different – and it's important to put this passage in the context of the audience for whom it was originally written. The themes of wealth and possessions were important to the writer of this Gospel. Look at the number of times these are mentioned in Luke. A few weeks ago, we heard Jesus tell a story about forgiveness, and it was placed in terms of two people owing a debt – one of 500 denarii and one of 50. In a few weeks, we will hear more parables related to wealth – one about a woman who drops everything else she is doing to find a single lost coin, and another about the shrewd manager and the adjusting of his master's financial books.

In fact, out of the 24 parables in the Gospel of Luke, at least one-quarter of them contain references to money, wealth or possessions. The meaning of each is much deeper than the surface story, as is true with all of the lessons of Jesus. But crafting the parables in these terms allows him to present them in a way that is easily recognizable to the listener, reflecting the times in which the followers of Jesus lived. An era of occupation by the Roman Empire. An economic system in place that allowed those in positions of authority and power – those with the most – to exploit those who possessed the least. A time when those *with* held back from those *without*.

And a time when, as the scholar Joel Green writes, "Economic sharing was embedded in social relations." For Green, sharing without expecting anything in return was to treat someone as family; not sharing with others was to give the impression that they were outside the community.

So here we have one family where the absence of sharing – like the difficulty my daughters had in sharing ponies and cards – is causing a rift between siblings. And the landowner who is building up bigger barns to store his crops, rather than sharing them with those in need, is isolating himself from the rest of his community.

But I think building community and eliminating division is based on more than sharing wealth and material possessions. It is about more than changing our focus from all that we have to looking at what is to come.

It is about sharing *ourselves*.

What each of us, you and I, can do to help build community is to give from the abundance of our spiritual gifts. We can't – as the landowner in this reading has done – sit back, relax and think about what the church will do tomorrow to help our neighbors, both within this building and in the wider world. What we can and should do is to think about what we can do *today*. And just as there so many wonderful individuals in this room today, that number is exceeded by the gifts each of you possesses – gifts that until now you might not have been prepared to share with the world.

Perhaps there is apprehension about whether particular gifts are needed. Maybe there's a feeling that "I'm not quite ready to help – but soon." There may even be a feeling similar to one that I've had in the past, the little voice that said, "I don't know if I can do that."

Having been part of this community for the past eight weeks has provided me with numerous chances to discover the things that I had been storing up within me. Some I wasn't even aware were there. There were certainly many ministries here that I had never been exposed to at other times and places in my journey. Admittedly, I felt a certain amount of apprehension about trying out my wings in these new areas. But once I was put in the position of having a chance to see what I could do, I discovered something amazing.

The exact gift or talent that I needed at any given moment was there. Often, I didn't see it coming – something that happens a lot in the Bible. The most miraculous things happen in the moments when we don't see them coming. And just as it was true for me, just as it worked out that my fear of doing something new and doing it to the best of my ability was replaced with amazement that, "Yes, I can!", so too can it be true for you.

And better than any bank or investment account that we could have, the return on letting loose our gifts has a return greater than anything you could possibly imagine.

So let's explore the gifts we have stored up in ourselves and put them to use. Look around this wonderful place and see where you contribute. At the risk of sounding like I'm giving a stewardship Sunday talk and encouraging you to volunteer, find out how much fun it is to be a greeter or usher. Discover how rewarding it is to be a part of the great team leading the Sunday school and youth programs. Take an hour or so once a month to spend some time with the guests to the pantry and HOST programs and, in sharing your gifts, learn about theirs. Join in with the activities of VOICE and our social ministry programs.

Recognize St. George's for what it truly is: not as a place to store up the treasure of our gifts, but as a place to use our gifts to be rich toward God.

Apprehension, uncertainty and feelings of readiness are often why we store up our own gifts for a rainy day. I hope you'll forgive me for saying something that sounds so opposed to our love of good weather, but every day can be that rainy day. Just as a person won't know they can swim until they get into the pool, or a bird won't know it can fly until it is nudged out of the nest, none of us can know what our mustard seeds can become until we allow ourselves to scatter them on the wind and see what grows.

Amen.