

American Lutheran Church of Sun City

First Lesson: Ecclesiastes 1:2, 12-14, 2:18-23

Second Lesson: Colossians 3:1-1

Psalm 49

Gospel Lesson: Luke 12:13-21

The Eight Sunday after Pentecost

July 31, 2022

**“Who Else Matters?”
Sermon by Pastor David Sivecz**

My official first call as a pastor was at Celebration Lutheran Church. It was a congregation about 10 minutes south of here. I remember when I first started, I was super excited. After years of seminary and training, I got to be the pastor of a congregation. Furthermore, I remember accepting that position because there was so much opportunity to be had in the church, in that area.

However, there was going to be a ton of work. To be an effective congregation, we needed to make sweeping changes. The list was extensive, but one of those changes was how could we best utilize our facility. During an interview, the call committee gave me a property tour. It wasn't an enormous place; they had a multiple-purpose room - which was used for worship and a fellowship hall - a small kitchen off to the side, and an educational wing.

But I won't forget the first time walking into the educational wing. I remember looking into each room and asking how the congregation used each one. The first, the committee said, was for the youth. The second was set aside for Alcoholic Anonymous and Overeaters Anonymous. The third was used for Sunday school. Then I looked into the fourth room and asked again. They responded, "Mostly to store stuff." I asked about the fifth room. "To store stuff." Then, the sixth room. Take a guess how it was used. To store stuff. Then we got to an extra office, and do you know how it was used? To store stuff.

Then across the hall was another small room, which was created as a storage room with more stuff. In addition, on the side of the sanctuary there was a utility room and a music room. Guess how it was used. To store stuff.

Over the next few months, God allowed us to bring in a preschool. However, before we could bring it in, we needed to turn these "storage rooms" back into classrooms. So, about ten months into my tenure, my parents flew out and we got a 20 cubic yard dumpster. Then we began to discard all the stuff the church didn't need. Seriously, we tossed 20-year-old Vacation Bible School curriculum, computers from the 1990s, broken cabinets, rusted chairs, and so on.

There was so much stuff! More importantly, there was so much stuff that wasn't needed, that prevented a vision from becoming a reality, and that served no purpose. Why hold onto it? Don't get me wrong, stuff can be useful, whether it's in the church or in our personal lives. In the church, we need computers to effectively and efficiently do our work, instruments to worship God, and copy machines to print bulletins. In our personal lives, we need a bed to sleep, kitchenware to cook our meals, and an air conditioner to stay cool in Arizona.

Now, I understand our needs are subjective. Some of you might disagree with how I used "need" and "stuff." Some believe we don't need computers, kitchenware, or even a bed. That's perfectly alright. Especially after hearing the Gospel reading, we might think that Jesus had a problem with us saying

that we need stuff. That's not the type of stuff that Jesus was addressing. Even though two brothers dragged him into their dispute, Jesus didn't have a problem with them having stuff or an inheritance.

It was common practice and still is for someone to leave an inheritance. It might help their children repay any debt, get financially secure, or invest in their business. It was also typical for disputing members to seek out a rabbi to be the mediator. But Jesus wanted no part of it. It's not that he had a problem with them disagreeing; instead, he had a problem with what the stuff was doing to their relationship.

Does that ever happen to us? When we accumulate an abundance of possessions or our materials grow exponentially, do we let it get in the way of a relationship? Do we ever take a moment to look around and see what it could do? How much of our day is consumed by taking care of things? Perhaps our stuff becomes our primary or even our only focus.

It's what happened to the farmer in the parable; his stuff became his primary focus. Let me be clear; Jesus didn't claim that the farmer was wrong in becoming wealthy. Nor did he mention that the farmer became prosperous through unethical means. For all we know, perhaps the season was perfect, and the harvest was plentiful. Regardless, the story doesn't state how he had an abundance of produce.

That's not important. The significant part of the story was what happened to the farmer when he received his abundance of produce. Listen to what he said, "What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?" Then he said, "I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grains and my goods. And I will say to my soul, Soul; you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry."

The little conversation he had with himself turned into the unholy trinity. As Christians, we believe in the doctrine of the Holy Trinity. It explains the relationship between the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. But the unholy trinity is the opposite; it's about "Me, Myself, and I."

The conversation we heard from the farmer was about the unholy trinity. He wasn't just making himself the most important person; he was the only person. He didn't mention anyone else. He didn't even consider who else might have contributed to his wealth or who else could benefit from it. In other words, he isolated himself.

If we are honest, I think we could see a little farmer in ourselves. It might be a bit painful and could even cause us to become defensive. Whether we realize it or not, sometimes, it's our nature to focus on the unholy trinity of "me, myself, and I." Especially when it comes to the stuff in our lives, we might say, "My house. My money. My clothes." But what if we take it a little further? What if our possessions aren't just the concrete stuff we place in storage? What if we've produced an abundance of status? We expect to be honored, others do what we say, or be first in line. I often wonder, if we only focus on ourselves, are we missing out on something more?

Leo Tolstoy once wrote a story. It was about a successful peasant farmer who was unsatisfied with his lot and wanted more of everything. One day he received a novel offer. For 1000 rubles, the farmer could have as much land as he wanted as long as he could walk around it in a day. The only catch was that he had to be back at his starting point by sundown.

Early the following day, he started out walking at a fast pace. By midday, he was exhausted but kept going, covering more ground. Well into the afternoon, he realized that his greed had taken him far from

the starting point. So, he quickened his pace, and as the sun began to sink lower in the sky, he started sprinting. He realized that if he didn't make it back by sundown, the opportunity to become an even more prominent landholder would be lost.

As the sun went below the horizon, he saw the finish line. Gasping for breath, he called upon every bit of strength left in his body and staggered across the line. He immediately collapsed with blood streaming from his mouth. In a few minutes, he was dead. Afterward, his servants dug a grave. It was not much over six feet long and three feet wide. The title of Tolstoy's story was: How Much Land Does a Man Need?

In the end, Tolstoy suggests, all a person truly owns is a six-foot by three-foot piece of earth. So, we are better off putting our confidence elsewhere. Jesus, like Tolstoy, warns us that we had better not put our trust in the promise of materialism; if we do, we will be sadly disappointed.

So, where can we put our confidence? Many years ago, a missionary named Bob Roberts was a guest speaker in a church. During worship, he shared his burden about the hungry children in the Philippines.

Afterward, a young boy, about seven years old, came up to him and said, "Jesus spoke to me tonight while you were telling us about the hungry children.... When you said that you could feed a child and give him a vitamin for a quarter a day, I thought, I've got to help. But I didn't know how I could. That's when Jesus spoke to me."

The lad extended his hand and said, "This is my shell collection. I believe Jesus wants me to give these shells to help the children." With those words, he placed the shells in Roberts' hand. Roberts accepted the shells but wondered how they could help hungry children.

A few weeks later, Roberts spoke to another congregation. Reaching into his pocket, he pulled out the seashells and told about that boy and his desire to feed hungry children. At the end of the service, a man approached Roberts and said, "I would like to purchase those shells for \$100!"

Bob Roberts added this comment, "My freckle-faced friend may never know that his sacrificial offering provided 400 meals for Filipino children. He may not have understood how the Lord would use this small gift to feed the hungry, but he knew God wanted him to give what he had."

That's what Jesus shares with us today. Jesus shares that God made us for more than status, security, and stuff. Remember, you will never see a U-Haul behind a hearse. Instead of placing our lives in our possessions, Jesus invites us to invest in our neighbors. We were made not for independence but for interdependence. God created us to be in a relationship with God and one another. That's the good news we hear today.

God didn't make us to be isolated from one another. Amid all the stuff that pulls us away, Christ invites us to be in community, consider others, and look beyond what we see. St. Augustine, a monk from the earlier church, once stated, "God gave us people to love and things to use. Sin, in short, is the confusion between these two things." Again, God made us for community and not for our stuff.

Moving away from being isolated by materialism and into a community of people is challenging. It's not easy to look past all the advertisements that say if we buy something, we will be secure or happy. It's not easy to realize we aren't the center of the world. But it's also not easy to be in a community. It

means working with and relying upon those we might disagree with. It means listening to each other and not talking over one another. It means forgiving those who have hurt us.

That's what it means to live within a community and not in isolation. It's a gift from God. It's where we see God forming us to reach out to others. It's through community everyone is changed for the better. It's where God can and does the most work. It's where God gives us new and abundant life. It's through a community that everyone will experience God's grace.

- Amen