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Epiphany Lutheran Church, Castle Rock, Colorado
Proper 13 (Pentecost 8), Series C
Saturday, August 3rd, 2019
Sunday, August 4th, 2019 (Consecration and Installation of DCE Intern)

Sermon: Holy Habits: Generosity

Text: Luke 12:13-21

Focus: Jesus Christ is rich in grace toward us.

Function: That they would give generously to God's kingdom work at church and in community.

Structure: Story-Applied

Locus: "We should fear, love, and trust in God above all things" (SC, First Commandment).

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Savior, Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen. Today we turn to the Parable of the Rich Fool (Luke 11:13-21), which will help us discover the "holy habit" of *generosity*. I realize that as soon as you hear the word generosity, you think I'm going to talk about stewardship (in general) and money (in particular). Yet today's message is not so much about money as it is about *idolatry*. Jean Calvin once said that the human heart is an idol factory. And while money may not be the only false god in our world—and hearts—it's probably the biggest one in America today.

Like many of Jesus' parables, today's teaching from our Lord is prompted by a question. Someone in the crowd calls out, "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me" (Luke 12:13). Unfortunately, this scene is all-too-familiar: siblings squabbling over the estate after their parents are dead and gone. The Bible instructs us: "Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others" (Phil. 2:4). Yet because of jealousy and selfish intent, sometimes the last time that adult siblings speak to one another is at the funeral. Often lawyers get involved so that by the time you're done suing your family for your "fair share," there's almost nothing left of the estate after court and attorney's fees.

But Jesus, even though he will judge the world on the Last Day, did not come to earth to judge or mediate squabbles between adult siblings (Luke 12:14; cf. John 3:17). He came to *save* the world and rescue us from our sin (John 3:16; 1 Tim. 1:15). Which is why Jesus warns, “Take care, and be on your guard against all covetousness, for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions” (Luke 12:15). There is much more to life than money and things. As many preachers have observed, you can’t take it with you, and you never see a U-Haul trailer towed by a hearse. The wealth of King Tut’s tomb proves that the Egyptian *tried* to take it with them, but now it’s on display in the British Museum. Obviously, things didn’t work out.

That Jesus has to tell us to be on guard against coveting indicates that greed is a real and present danger—a threat to our salvation. In the Medieval Church, “avarice” was listed among the so-called “Seven Deadly Sins.” (Now we just go the wine section at the liquor store and enjoy a glass of Seven Deadly *Zins!*) In our epistle lesson, St. Paul warns that coveting is idolatry (Col. 3:5). Greed steals our hearts away from God and causes us to trust in our wealth (or ourselves) instead of Christ. As Martin Luther states in the *Large Catechism*, “A god means that from which we are to expect all good and in which we are to take refuge in all distress.... Whatever you set your heart on and put your trust in is truly your god” (LC, I, 2-3).

Like the rich fool in Jesus’ story, we have a tendency to put all our faith and trust in idols—money, in particular. In my pre-marriage classes with engaged couples, we spend an entire session on what the Bible teaches about money. As I mentioned before, the Bible talks a *lot* about money—in both the Old and New Testaments. God cares about how we earn our money, how we spend it, how we use it, how much we give back to the Lord, and whether or not we use it to bless others. So in my marriage class I give couples an assessment that helps reveal their emotional connection to money. When we turn money into an idol, it’s usually because

there's some need or fear behind it. That's why we tend to view money as either security, entertainment, power, or status.

For some, money makes them feel safe. If I just had X amount of dollars in my bank account, then I'll be okay. If I can save up so much money in my 401(k) or Roth IRA, then I'll be able to retire. But otherwise, I'm doomed! See how the idea that money is your safety net or security blanket takes your eyes off Christ, who is your real protector and Savior?

For others, money exists solely for your pleasure. Like the rich fool, they say, "Relax, eat, drink, be merry." Enjoy the good life! The world is your oyster, and you can have whatever money can buy: fancy clothes, expensive wine, fine dining, a luxurious home, and the ultimate adventure vacations. But do you see how shallow and empty such a life is? People who spend their retirement playing golf and taking cruises think they're enjoying the good life. But, in fact, they are only worshiping themselves and their own fleshly desires. They're not loving or serving their neighbors in need. A little fun and a splurge here and there is not evil. But a life of pleasure for pleasure's sake is vanity and utterly meaningless. You are literally amusing yourself to death. "You fool!" God says in the parable. "Tonight you're going to die and give an account of your soul, and who's going to enjoy all your stuff when you are gone?" (cf. Luke 12:20).

Other people view money as a way to exert power or influence over other people. "Money makes the world go 'round," or so they say. So, because of our wealth, we feel entitled to control things and other people. Sometimes, even in the Church, wealthy people think that the bigger their offering, the bigger their say should be in the way the church conducts business. Somebody trying to have their way once boasted to me, "Pastor, I give thousands of dollars to this church," to which I smiled and replied, "Thank you. So do I." But even if money gives us control over other people in politics, business, and other social spheres, it's not supposed to be

that way for Christians. Jesus says, “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. It shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant” (Matt. 20:25-26). God gives us money to love and serve people who are worse off than we are—not to manipulate and coerce others. St. Paul writes:

“As for the rich in this present age, charge them not to be haughty, nor to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but on God, who richly provides us with everything to enjoy. They are to do good, to be rich in good works, to be generous and ready to share, thus storing up treasure for themselves as a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of that which is truly life” (1 Tim. 6:17-19).

God calls and commands rich people to have generous hearts and share with others less fortunate than themselves. In the Old Testament, he explicitly mentions the poor, widows, orphans, and even aliens and foreigners who live among us.

But you don’t have to be rich in order for money to be your god. And not all rich people are evil or bad. In fact, some of the most righteous people in the Bible were exceedingly wealthy, including “Father” Abraham and King David. You can be poor as dirt and still wrongly believe that money is the answer to your problems.

Some people think the Bible says that money is the root of all evil. But what the Bible *really* says is, “The *love* of money is a root of all kinds of evil” (1 Tim. 6:10). In and of itself, there’s nothing wrong with money. It’s just printed paper or stamped metal. Money is a tool, a way to conduct business and trade and support the callings and vocations of your neighbors. Currency was invented because the barter system wasn’t working anymore. (If I’m a chicken farmer and you’re a blacksmith who doesn’t eat chicken, how in the world will I get my horses shod?) But when we make money the focus of our lives, that’s when we get into trouble. As Jesus says elsewhere, “No servant can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love

the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God *and* money” (Luke 16:13).

The trouble with making money your god is that Mammon is a bitter master. No matter how much you earn or have, it’s never enough. The god of money always wants more, more, more! King Solomon writes, “He who loves money will not be satisfied with money...” (Eccl. 5:10). Somebody once asked John D. Rockefeller, the oil tycoon and world’s first billionaire, how many millions of dollars are enough. His reply: “the *next* million!”

All the wealth of the rich man in Jesus’ parable became a burden. He was stressed instead of blessed (Luke 12:17). He had so much wealth that he didn’t know what to do with it. So he spent time, energy, and worry trying to figure out where to put it. His “solution” was to tear down his barns and build bigger barns (v. 17). You see?! More is never enough.

After God’s terrible revelation that he’s going to die and never even get a chance to enjoy his prosperity, Jesus delivers the point of the parable: “So is the one who lays up treasure for himself and is not rich toward God” (v. 21). What does that mean, being rich toward God? At first blush, it might seem that we need to give lots and lots of money to the Church or the poor in order to get on God’s good side. The more we give, the better we’ll feel, and the more God will love us. But that’s just another trap and a rebranding of money as power or control. In this scheme, we manipulate God by trying to make him beholden to us. How is that any different than buying indulgences to keep your soul out of purgatory, the very practice Martin Luther despised in the Roman Catholic Church?

No, being rich toward God must mean more than just giving money. The Epistle of James urges us to be “rich in faith” (Jas. 2:5). Jesus told the rich, young ruler, “Go, sell what you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven...” (Matt. 19:21). Is that

what it means to be rich toward God: help the poor? To be honest, *I don't know*. Yet I suspect that being rich towards God has less to do with money and more to do with your heart. Are you grateful for all of God's gifts? Do you rejoice in his salvation? Do you desire to love and serve your neighbor out of thankful obedience?

St. Paul says that *God* is "rich in mercy" toward us (Eph. 2:4). "For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for our sake he became poor, so that you, by his poverty might become rich" (2 Cor. 8:9). Jesus was the Son of God and Creator of the universe, but he gave all that up to come down to earth and wander the earth as a homeless, itinerant preacher. "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head" (Luke 9:58). Then Jesus journeyed to the cross, where even his clothing was taken away from him, leaving him utterly destitute and completely poor. He died as a criminal between two thieves. But the blood he shed on the cross was more costly than all the gold and silver and jewels in the world. Jesus died to forgive our sins and remove the idols from our hearts. He rose again so that he could sit upon the throne of our hearts and shower us with mercy and grace.

Money could never buy what Jesus freely gives. Yet just because forgiveness is free doesn't make it cheap. Our salvation cost God the death of his only-begotten Son, the most priceless gift the world has ever seen.

We have a loving, heavenly Father who delights in giving his children good gifts (cf. Jas. 1:17). "You will be made rich in every way so that you can be generous on every occasion" (2 Cor. 9:11, NIV). Our generous God gives us a generous heart. The love of Christ fills our hearts and overflows in love for God and other people. Of course, we can never out-give God—and he doesn't expect us too! His lavish love is more than enough. May our hearts overflow in "a

wealth of generosity” for the sake of God’s kingdom work (2 Cor. 8:2). In the name of the Father and of the Son and of ✠ the Holy Spirit. Amen.