

5.21.2023 Sunday after the Ascension (1 Peter 4:7-11; Luke 12:16-21)

The Parable of the Rich Fool is a story Jesus told about a wealthy landowner, a farmer whose land produced so plentifully that *“he thought to himself, ‘What shall I do, for I have nowhere to store my crops?’ And he said, ‘I will do this: I will tear down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain 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.”’ But God said to him, ‘Fool! This night your soul is required of you, and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?’ So is the one who lays up treasure for himself and is not rich toward God”* (Luke 12:16-21).

Jesus told this story two thousand years ago, but a person could easily argue that it is even more relevant in our day and in our culture than it was at that time. Our land has produced so plentifully that every day many people are confronted with the same dilemma as the Rich Fool. We foolishly think to ourselves, *“What shall I do, for I have nowhere to store my goods.”* And then we say, *“I’ll do this: I’ll sell my house and move into a bigger one, I’ll rent an additional storage unit, I’ll open another retirement account, and there will I store all my goods and all my money. And one day I will say to my soul, Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years: relax, eat, drink, be merry.”*

And as the old saying goes, *“Man plans, and God laughs.”* Like rich fools too often we spend our days selfishly piling up treasures on this earth, living as if we have plenty of time, but even a long life is soon over. The psalmist writes, *“LORD, remind me how brief my time on earth will be. Remind me that my days are numbered - how fleeting my life is. You have made my life no longer than the width of my hand. My entire lifetime is just a moment to you; at best, each of us is but a breath”* (Psalm 39:4-5). Scripture also describes our time here as being like a *“passing shadow”* (Psalm 144:4), like wildflowers, that *“bloom and die”* (Psalm 103:15), like *“a vapor that appears for a little time and then vanishes away”* (James 4:14).

Even a long life is soon over, and the sudden, unexpected death of the Rich Fool, a man who had the goods stored up, but no time left to enjoy them, is a powerful illustration of just how foolish it is to selfishly pile up treasures on

this earth. God calls this man a fool, Jesus said, because he laid up treasure for himself, and was not rich toward God. In other words, he amassed this great fortune only to satisfy his own gluttonous desires. He pursued these goods so that he could eat, drink, and be merry. Instead of honoring God, instead of being generous and holy and rich in God by obeying the command to reach out with an open heart and an open hand to those who are poor and needy (Deuteronomy 15:11), rather than choosing to live in union with God and his neighbor, the Rich Fool looked at all this wealth as a means of self-indulgence and luxurious living, and in doing so, he built his house on the sinking sand of this world, and on that very night “*the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew.*” The dark storm of death “*beat upon that house; and it fell: and great was the fall of it*” (Matthew 7:27).

The Parable of the Rich Fool provides us with a picture of not just one man, but of all those whose selfish affections are set so narrowly on the “*cares and riches and pleasures of this life*” (Luke 8:14) that they refuse to acknowledge the truth that this earthly life is like *a vapor that appears for a little time and then vanishes away*. The rapid demise of the Rich Fool presents us with a vivid, disturbing illustration of sudden death, in his example we see the brevity of life, and in the Epistle we read this morning, St. Peter was inspired to write about aspects of the same topic. Our reading today began with Peter declaring, “*The end of all things is at hand...*” (1 Peter 4:7).

Now when we read these words, we recognize that Peter is writing first and foremost to a particular people at a particular moment in history. To the Jewish people, and to the early Church, this declaration, *the end of all things is at hand*, speaks not only about this fleeting earthly life, but *the end of all things* that pertain to it. To his original audience, Peter’s statement would bring to mind Jesus’ prophecy about the destruction of the Temple, in which He told the disciples who commented on the beauty of those buildings, “... *Not one stone shall be left upon another, that shall not be thrown down*” (Mark 13:2). Peter’s statement would also cause his original audience to recall these words of warning that our Lord spoke directly to them: “*They shall put you out of the synagogues: yea, the time cometh, that whosoever killeth you will think that he doeth God service*” (John 16:2).

In a first-century context, Peter’s statement speaks about the brevity of life,

the destruction of the Temple, the end of their nation, and in a twenty-first century context, we find this statement, this word from God given through Peter, continues to be a powerful reminder of the truth that we all need to hear: *The end of all things is at hand.*

This is a truth that our enemy doesn't want us to hear. He would have us act like rich fools, people who live as if the end of all things is nowhere in sight, people who believe their lives and the world as we know it will continue indefinitely, but God doesn't want us to be fooled, and therefore He speaks to those who have ears to hear. He tells us, in plain language, that the end of all things is at hand, and we should face this reality by living our lives in accordance with the truth that He has revealed to us. The Scripture we read calls us, as the people of God, to prepare ourselves for that end, which for those who love God is best described not so much as an end, but as a great beginning that starts when this earthly life is over, a great beginning that is just another chapter in the eternal, abundant life that has already begun.

Listen to how St. Peter tells us to live as a people prepared for *the end of all things*. He writes, “... *be ye therefore sober, and watch unto prayer. And above all things have fervent charity among yourselves: for charity shall cover the multitude of sins. Use hospitality one to another without grudging. As every man hath received the gift, even so minister the same one to another, as good stewards of the manifold grace of God*” (1 Peter 4:7b-10). What kind of life does God call us to live knowing that the end of all things is at hand? Certainly not the life of a rich fool, a selfish glutton whose only desire is to eat, drink, and be merry. Instead, God calls us to a life of love, a life dedicated to loving and serving one another. He tells us to forgive one another in love, for “*hatred stirs up strife: but love covers a multitude of sins*” (Proverbs 10:12; 1 Peter 4:8), and God tells us to show hospitality to one another without grumbling, to use the various gifts that He has given us to serve one another in love, proving ourselves to be good stewards of His amazing grace. These things we do and this life we live, we live by the grace of God and in the strength of God “*in order that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ*” (1 Peter 4:11).

My friends, “*You do not know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? For you are a vapor that appears for a little time and then vanishes*” (James

4:14). The passages we read this morning help us recognize that we only have today to love God and our neighbor. We only have today to share His Word and plant seeds that will bear fruit for His kingdom. We only have today to live for Him and with Him and in Him. This day is a precious gift from God. By His grace, may you and I honor the Giver by reaching out to receive this gift, and then sharing every part of it with the world He gave the life of His only Son to save.