



THE UNITED CHURCH OF CANADA

CANADIAN MEMORIAL CHURCH
& CENTRE FOR PEACE

Sermon Preached By Bruce Sanguin

Luke 12: 13-21

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10th Sunday after Pentecost

“On Being Rich Toward God”

Remember the Bre-X scandal? A gold mine in Borneo was promoted as having the largest deposits in the history of the world. Within seven years the stock rocketed from a penny stock to \$200.00. The banks, the Teacher’s Fund, and 1000’s of average citizens like you and me, jumped on board, imagining that this gold mine was the ticket to our freedom. The CEO in the case was acquitted this week, even though he cashed in something like 200 million dollars worth of stock just months before it crashed. The CBC interviewed a 75 year-old man from a small Ontario town who was still working because he invested everything he had in the frenzy known as Bre-X. It was very sad. I noticed he blamed everybody else, but he didn’t talk about the role of greed.

A rich man thinks to himself after his land has had such a good harvest that he has no place to store his crops: “I know what I’ll do. I’ll build bigger barns and start storing up my grains and all my goods. And I’ll say to my soul, ‘Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, and be merry.’”

I watched the film, *Blood Diamonds* the other night on DVD. Blood diamonds are those diamonds that were extracted from the mines in

Africa and sold on the black market to major diamond corporations. These diamonds ended up on the fingers of brides all over the Western world. The film shows how corruption and greed cost hundreds of thousands of local African people their lives. It’s told from the perspective of a diamond trader and arms dealer, a journalist, and a local African man. The diamonds would be illegally purchased by diamond corporations and secretly stored in vaults. This enabled them to control the supply and demand and keep the prices up. The film is a sad and poignant story about the cost of greed and the lengths humans are willing to go because of it.

All for the fantasy of being able to “relax, eat, drink, and be merry.” It is a fantasy that preoccupies most citizens of developed nations. My fantasy goes to a beach on a Caribbean Island, with an endless supply of Corona beer and fresh limes. We have been led to believe life is about storing up goods, so that one day we will be free to do anything we wish – mostly a lot of nothing. It’s called our retirement plan. “Anything we wish” still translates, 2000 years after Jesus taught his parable, into this fantasy. Which is interesting in itself, isn’t it? Why are we so starved for the freedom to do relax and have some fun? Is it because we work too hard, put in too

many hours, and sacrifice our lives during the best and most productive years of our life? Is it because we're starved for fun? Collectively, have we bought into the Protestant work ethic? This idea originated with Calvin, who believed that it was actually Christ-like to work like a demon. This was primarily it kept us from being idle and idleness was the devil's playground. And so, retirement is the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow. We deserve it. We've put in our innings. Done our duty. Made our sacrifices. Stored up our goods. Now, let the good times roll.

I was watching *The Dragon's Den* on CBC the other night. Great entertainment. Four incredibly wealthy entrepreneurs listen to pitches from people who have ideas for a business. They're pitching the successful entrepreneurs for start-up money, in exchange for a share in the business. Most of the ideas get turned down, because they are too small. There's no "scalability", which means that nobody is going to get stinking rich on this deal. I love Kevin. He's one of the rich guys – an unabashed capitalist who is convinced that greed is a virtue and will one day save the world. It's beautiful to watch him, because he so clearly embodies a particular value system. He doesn't pretend to be a saint. If there's nothing in it for him, then it can't be good for the world. He's just so genuinely greedy that you gotta love him. One artist was pitching technology for converting glass from office towers that get torn down to art pieces. Kevin wasn't the least bit interested in the art. He wanted the

guy to sell his patent on the technology. The guy thought it was worth 10 million dollars. Kevin offered him \$300,000 and a 7% royalty on the sales. The most important question Kevin asked the artist turned aspiring millionaire was "do you want to be incredibly wealthy?" The artist said yes, and that sealed the deal.

Well, Jesus cuts through the greed game with typical clarity. What he says has been interpreted in a couple of ways: the first is how I've typically interpreted his teaching – namely, you can't take it with you, so get your head on straight about the meaning of your life. This is true, of course, but in my experience, until we're lying on our death having heard the terminal verdict issued, our capacity for denial is profound. "Well, you can't take your barns, your pension, or all the stuff you've accumulated with you, so get your head on straight." We never really believe that we're going to die, and in any case, the "you-can't-take-it-with-you" argument could lead to an even more cynical conclusion. The author of *Ecclesiastes* comes to exactly this solution. He's tried everything in life, and it's left him dazed and confused. My friend, Kevin, of the *Dragon's Den*, would love his solution – eat, drink and be merry. It's in the Bible.

Which brings me to the second take on Jesus' teaching. Recall that this teaching was in response to a man who asked Jesus to be an arbitrator in dividing up his family inheritance. His brother is apparently withholding the man's inheritance. Now, in my

business, which deals with a fair bit of death and dying, I can tell you that the division of the estate, following death, decimates a good number of families. Families end up in the courts for years, and cause family division for a lifetime. Greed rears its ugly head. Everybody suddenly wants more, whether its more money or more recognition or more love – all symbolized by how the inheritance is divided. The specific questions Jesus puts to the man, using God’s voice is: “You fool! This very night your soul is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, *whose* will they be?” (Luke 12:20) I’m thinking that Jesus is asking the guy to think about where his greed will lead him – to exactly the place that is causing his suffering now. Say he uses his inheritance to amass more wealth. Who is he going to leave it to? Jesus is asking the man to think about what it is he is asking for.

This man is unconsciously on the road to perpetuating the inheritance fiasco he has found himself in with his brother. He’ll pass on the cycle of greed to his own offspring. This is often the most enduring inheritance passed on by last wills and testaments. Sure, you get a cottage out of it, maybe a trust fund for your children – which by the way does curious things to the character of trust fund children – but it costs you relationships and possibly an ulcer.

Ok, now let’s take it to another level. *Whose* will it be? Jesus asks. Now, this is a high level perspective. It’s the perspective of Spirit. Notice how Jesus sets up his example that he’s going to

use to teach the lesson. He says, “The *land* of a rich man produced abundantly.” The land produced abundantly, not the rich man. The rich man harvested. The land produced. We tend to take credit for whatever wealth we amass – after all we’ve worked hard, sacrificed certain things – but where does all wealth originate? Not with us. It comes from the earth. Every penny that has ever been made in the history of this planet has come from the land – as in our planet. It’s pure gift. And guess what? Everything that has ever been manufactured, and every fortune that has ever been amassed or ever will be amassed is going to return to the earth along with our bodies. No thing, nothing, belongs to us. It’s on temporary loan. We grab all we can from the earth and then call it ours. The irony is that the earth is happy to give all She can give. All she asks in return is that we leave her the way we found her. Whose will it be, all this stuff?

The earth herself is an embodiment of the Holy *One* – the unitary, generative Source out of which all creation has manifest. Whose will it be, all our stuff? It will belong to the One. It is all a manifestation of the Oneness, the Source, in whom we live and move and have our being. I realize that most of the time we walk around as though we’re isolated sacs of bones and blood, separate from each other, from the earth and from the Holy *Oneness*. I realize that in a market economy we’re asked to believe that we’re in competition with everybody else. But this is an illusion of the ego. It’s a game we play with ourselves.

Because we do not dwell within our true identity, we worry that we don't have our share – rather than, for example, making sure all citizens of the earth have a share in the free gift of the earth's resources. Because we imagine that the earth belongs to us, rather than being a manifestation, as we are, of the Holy *Oneness*, we build bigger barns, scheme how to control a bigger share of the market, fantasize about being stinking rich and finally free. The first thing to go missing in this worldview of insufficiency is gratitude. Greed decimates gratitude by perpetuating the illusion that we don't have enough.

Free *for* what? *From* what? There's no place to go, nowhere to hide. We're all in this together, forever. The task, spiritually, is to experience our unity, with the earth, with each other, and with the Holy One, who animates all creation, and has brought all this into being out of Love. To realize this, in our heart and in our mind, is to receive the only inheritance that matters – and the only inheritance that will ever make us happy. I think this is what Jesus means when he offers, as the solution, that we think less about storing up treasures for ourselves, and more about what it means to be “rich toward God” (12:21).

Material wealth doesn't bring the kind of freedom we yearn for at the level of Spirit. True freedom is discovering that there *is* nothing to strive for. When we align ourselves with the Holy *One*, we can stop striving to have more and to be more.

Paradoxically, we'll *receive* more and be more because, through our alignment with the Holy *One*, the inheritance of a 14 billion year, Spirit-infused universe, will come coursing through us and we'll find ourselves reaping a harvest of pure grace. We'll discover ourselves as centers of creativity. We don't have to wait for anybody to die to receive this inheritance – just our egos.

Being rich toward God means that we'll grow and evolve, but without striving – like the lily of the field. We'll serve and love, but not because we *should*. We'll experience joy, but it won't be because of our “stuff”. Then again, we'll love our stuff, because we'll understand that it's a gift of God. And we'll hold it lightly. We'll share our stuff, because we'll understand that it's pure gift and part of the delight of life is letting it flow through us for a greater cause. We'll walk lightly upon the earth, not because it's an ethical imperative, but because the beings we share the planet with, human and other-than-human are our kin, exquisite manifestations of God. Why would we want to harm them? We'll be gentle with ourselves and our foibles, because mistakes are merely lessons to help us overcome our separateness. No mistakes – no growth. We'll forgive others, not because Jesus' tells us to, but because those who hurt us are also somewhere themselves on the journey of realizing their unity with God. Our lives will be an offering of gratitude for getting a chance to be alive on this jewel of a planet. We'll be rich toward God. Receive this inheritance, my friends. It's divided equally among us. With this

inheritance, the Holy *One* doesn't play favorites.