

## Sermon for July 31, 2016 - “Emptied and Set Free”

Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost  
July 31, 2016  
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church  
Decorah, Iowa  
Gospel: Luke 12: 13-2  
Rev. Amy Zalk Larson

Ecclesiastes 1:2, 12-14; 2:18-23; Psalm 49:1-6; Colossians 3:1-11

### Emptied and Set Free

Beloved of God, grace to you and peace in the name of Jesus.

Recently, some Namibian Lutherans were in northeast Iowa visiting Lutherans here. My friend Pr. Phil Olson was giving one of the pastors a tour of the area. The Namibian pastor asked Phil, “What are all these long buildings with lots of doors?” Phil replied, “Those are storage units.” “Storage units?” the pastor asked, perplexed. “Yes,” Phil explained with some embarrassment and Western guilt, “places where people store extra things.” “Hmm”, the Namibian pastor replied, “we don’t have extra things. If we do ever have more than we need, there is always someone else who can use it.”

Someone else. The awareness that there’s always someone else is what the rich fool in our parable today misses. The little conversation he has with himself after his land produces abundantly is completely self-centered.

- The whole time he only thinks about himself - “What should *I* do, *I* have no place to store *my* goods. *I* will do this - *I* will tear down my barns, there *I* will store all *my* grain and goods.”
- He doesn’t acknowledge that anyone else has had anything do with the great harvest. Back then he certainly would have had workers to help him plant, till and harvest. Others contributed to his success and would benefit from receiving their share of his abundance, but he doesn’t own up to this. He just keeps referring to them as *my* grains and my goods.
- He certainly isn’t aware of others beyond his circle of workers who might need some help.
- He also confers only with himself - he doesn’t ask the advice of anyone else. Rather than consulting others or scripture, he thinks to himself - “What should I do?”
- He doesn’t thank God for the land, the weather and all the abundance.
- He doesn’t even celebrate with anyone else. I know we live in an age where we sometimes over-share about our joys, especially on Facebook, but how sad that this guy doesn’t call his friends and family to celebrate with him after this great year.
- Instead of planning a party, he plans ahead to talk to his soul. He says, “And I will say to my soul, Soul, you have ample goods ... relax, eat, drink, be merry.”

Even if he hadn’t died that night, he would be pitiable - how sad to see him sitting there, yep, just him, himself and he and his soul having a party. What an empty, impoverished life. This rich fool is so full of himself and his possessions that he has no room for connection to God and to others. He looks to his possessions to provide him with joy and security. This is not the life that God longs for us to have. God longs for us to be rich towards God, filled with the good gifts that God wants to give us - faith, hope, love, peace, meaning, purpose.

Yet the world constantly works to sell us a lie - the lie that we can find joy through possessions, that we can find security by having enough stuff. The rich fool conversing with his soul is an extreme example

and a cautionary tale about some of the people our culture tells us to idealize. Yet we can easily find ourselves in a position similar to the rich fool. Our houses and our lives get so full of stuff.

- We have to take care of all that stuff and that takes more of our time and attention.
- We have to protect our stuff from other people, so grow wary and distrustful and disconnected.

All the energy we spend dealing with our stuff can't be used for relationships, connections, community, faith - the things that give us true peace and joy. We end up full of ourselves and yet so very impoverished.

We need help. We need the help that only God can give. To start, we need God to call us into community again and again and again. And this is what God does. Over and over, God works to gather us as God has gathered us this morning. God has worked to get us all here today. Here we are connected to others as we sing, pray, hear the Word and receive God's meal of love. Here we are connected to the needs of the world. Here, too, God convicts us of pride and greed with parables and teachings like the one this morning. We are so often like the rich fool. But, God doesn't stop there. Nothing, not even stuff, pride and greed, can ever prevent God from loving us and forgiving us. God showers love, forgiveness, and healing upon us as we worship and as we receive Holy Communion, so that we will be cleansed, opened and set free.

God then sends us out to give of ourselves in service to others. We need to give so that we can be emptied of our self-centeredness and opened to God and others. We need to practice generosity for the sake of the world and also for the sake of ourselves. The Namibians who give away their extra things are helping those who need the stuff, but they are also helping themselves. When they give stuff away, they don't have to deal with more things. They strengthen the bonds of community that sustain them. They become less self-centered and more open to others. We see this happen in our own lives as well. When we clean out our closets and give to the Depot we experience freedom.

When we decide we don't need more stuff and then have more money and time to give away, we experience tremendous joy. When we give of ourselves - through Kids' Lunch Club, through helping refugee families in Postville, through the Krumkake sales that provide hospitality and raise funds for service - we help but we, too, are set free.

There is tremendous freedom and joy in letting go of stuff and giving of ourselves. Yet this is a counter-cultural way of living; so again, we need God and community to help us. We need the practices of Christian life - gathering together in worship, being convicted and forgiven, and then being sent out in service. In these ways we are set free from our impoverished lives and filled with the riches God longs for us and all people to know.

Let's take a moment to pray for God to free us again today for lives of service and joy and wonderful abundance.

Amen.