

“Preparing Your Will”

Colossians 3:1-11 and Luke 12:13-21

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I want to start with one of my favorite questions in the world. Now, this is a “none-of-my-business” question, but pastors get to ask those kinds of questions, so here goes: “How many of you have a will?”

Fact is we all have a will. The only open question is who wrote it, you or the State of Connecticut (or whatever state you hail from if you are visiting today). I often like to say that if you have not written a will and you think the State of Connecticut will make better decisions than you about the disposition of your property and assets, and who in the family should get the heirloom jewelry and the antique baptismal gown and granddad’s tools, then, by all means, do not write a will. If you think that is not the case, and you do not yet have a legal document called a will, please make an appointment with your attorney tomorrow.

“And I will say to my soul, ‘Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.’” (Luke 12:19) The modern iteration is the bumper sticker that says *“The one that dies with the most toys wins.”*

God’s rebuttal is thus: *“But God said to [the rich man], ‘You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?’”* The rebuttal bumper sticker says *“The one that dies with the most toys still dies.”*

Today’s Gospel story reminds us of the inevitable. A treasurer in one of my churches is fond of saying *“None of us gets out alive.”* The old Methodist Book of Worship, relying on its Anglican antecedent, The Book of Common Prayer, puts it more poetically but no less clearly:

“Since we know not what a day may bring forth, but only that the hour for serving thee is always present, may we wake to the instant claims of thy holy will, not waiting for tomorrow, but yielding today.”

Now before someone jumps up and joins the monastery or the cloister, let me say there is nothing inherently wrong with possessions. Christianity does not require a vow of poverty. In fact, one might argue that the rich man was being a good steward. He was not letting the crops rot in the field. He was preparing for the proverbial rainy day.

Rather, the problem seems to be the man's focus, which appears to be on the possessions rather than on God. Jesus tells this parable to illuminate his statement in verse 15: *"Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions."*

So you say "I don't have much stuff?" According to Elizabeth Hovde in "The Oregonian" newspaper one year ago today (www.oregonlive.com/hovde/index), Americans earning \$10,000 a year are richer than 84% of the world. Americans earning \$50,000 are richer than 99% of the world. We, you and I, are the rich man.

Allow me to go from "preachin' to meddlin'", even if the life I'm meddling in is my own. In January I emptied my home of 17.5 years. I threw away in excess of ten pick-up truck loads of stuff. I gave away the equivalent of at least three loads. My sons took some (but not all) of their stuff. And at the end, I still had enough stuff to fill a garage bay. I am the rich man. Woe to any of you who have lived in your place for a while without purging. When the time comes, I am a sympathetic ear!

So if there is nothing inherently wrong with possessions, if Christianity does not require a vow of poverty, what's the problem? It is priorities. In the parable the man is not a bad man, just a self-satisfied one, seemingly without awareness of the brevity of life and a greater responsibility. While Christianity does not require poverty, it DOES require placing God first or, in the words of today's scripture, being rich toward God.

Theologically, we outlive our “stuff.” If we believe that this life is not the end, that there is a greater and more glorious life to be had, then we will indeed outlive our “stuff.” What to do with it is the purpose of a will, yes. But Jesus’ message is painfully clear: *“So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God.”* The message is that life is short, nothing is guaranteed, and investing in the Godly life—a life that reaches to neighbor in selflessness rather than toward self in greed—is what is required.

As with so much of what Jesus teaches, there is also a practical earthly dimension to his teaching as well. Note that the context of Jesus’ riff on the danger of possessions and greed is in response to a request that he arbitrate a family squabble over possessions. While it never broke into open warfare, I well remember the tension between my mother and aunt—both now gone to glory and, I pray, reconciled from some of their earthly sparring—over the “things” of my grandmother. So if you do not have a will and do not wish to have one because you think you do not have much stuff or that you are never going to die, at least consider your dear ones and prevent one of your children from being that voice in the crowd that calls out *“Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me.”* Our quest for things and the damage it can do to human relationships is also another way to pray about how this story may speak to us.

There is no neat ending to this story. I can’t say, “Do such-and-such and you will be spared the trauma of the man in the parable.” What I *can* say, beyond my hope that you will have a legal will, is that you will also have a spiritual will. It is already written in part, in your check book register and on-line bank statement. If that was all we knew about you, what would it say?

Your spiritual will is also comprised of your prayers, your presence, your service and your witness to the living God. What are you doing in these arenas that are an investment in being rich toward God?

Since I truly believe that God as a priority has to do with God as our first love, let me close with this story, told on me by my late mother.

When I was growing up we had next door neighbors, Dulcie and Lee Fencil. They were no blood relation but because the Bodt boys were fond of them we called them “Aunt” Dulcie and “Uncle” Lee. Aunt Dulcie and my mother agreed that I could wander over to visit when I wanted. If it was a good time I could stay and if it was a bad time I would be invited to visit another day, and so the neighborhood peace was kept.

One day when I was four years old, I wandered over to Aunt Dulcie’s and she was baking cookies. Now to fully appreciate what transpired you must know that I love cookies, and particularly chocolate chip cookies, as anyone observing me at the Cookie Walk would tell you. That day Aunt Dulcie was baking chocolate chip cookies and she offered me one. While I was chomping I asked Aunt Dulcie why she was baking cookies and she said “For Uncle Lee.” I said, “Why?” Aunt Dulcie replied, “Because Uncle Lee loves cookies.” Long pause. Then intoned the four-year old philosopher “But Aunt Dulcie, Uncle Lee should love God and not cookies.”

It’s okay to love both and to be fond of our possessions. But we will outlive them. May our wealth, our assets, our things all point to our first priority, our first love, be to be “rich toward God” (Luke 12:21). Amen.