

How Much is Enough

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LUKE 12: 13-21

HOW MUCH IS ENOUGH?

Yesterday morning I had meetings with families at both ends of life's continuum. First I had breakfast with Cassandra and Joel and their beautiful seven month old daughter Lindley to prepare for today's baptism. And then I went over to Northpoint Woods to visit William Button and his son Jim in order to make plans for Joanne's funeral service on Monday. Joanne Button died suddenly this past week of a massive stroke.

At an emotional level, the two conversations were as different as they could possibly be. The first meeting was full of smiles and giggles and baby talk. Lindley held us spellbound for most of the hour as we observed every gesture and every sound she made and wondered what she might be imagining as she sat in on our conversation about her baptism. We talked a lot about the future: about the new life that Cassandra and Joel have taken on as parents, about the hopes for a shorter work commute for Joel and about the next developmental milestone for Lindley. She is going to be crawling soon and life in the Beuchler-Sleper household is about to get a bit more challenging once Lindley is mobile. Even though Joel and Cassandra are sleep deprived and fall into bed exhausted at the end of most days, it is hard to imagine anyone being happier than they are right now. Their eyes beam with pride and joy as they cherish the miracle of their daughter.

My second meeting yesterday morning had a very different tone. Our voices were quiet and subdued as we sat together in William's living room. We talk about death in whispered tones because grief somehow seems to constrict our airways. Words caught in William's throat as he spoke with me in halting sentences about his wife Joanne and the life they shared together. Other than the details of tomorrow's funeral service, we didn't talk at all about what the future

held. Instead we spent our time together reminiscing and sharing stories from the past: how they first met, what they did to support their family, the jobs they held, the houses they lived in, the sons they raised. At this point I don't think William can even imagine what life will be like for him without Joanne. Every memory of her brings tears of sorrow to his eyes.

At an emotional level, the two conversations that I had yesterday morning couldn't have been more different, but at a content level they were surprisingly similar. They were all about relationships. They were about love and devotion. They were about the importance of family. They were about how blessed they have been by the experiences they have shared with the people God has brought into their lives.

They were not conversations about money or possessions or wealth. Cassandra and Joel did not itemize for me the first year costs involved in raising a baby (which, according to The Baby Center website, is approximately \$10,000). William did not review with me an itemized statement of his wife's funeral expenses (which happens to be about the same as the first year costs of raising a baby).

Joel and Cassandra did not talk about the array of toys and outfits and nursery furnishings they have been purchasing for their daughter. They had packed several colorful playthings into Lindley's car seat but she was perfectly content to suck on the end of a nylon strap, and see how many of her fingers she could stuff into her mouth at one time and enjoy shredding a table napkin into confetti. Material possessions didn't seem all that significant to Lindley.

William did not bring out his wife's jewelry box and display each necklace, bracelet and ring that his wife had accumulated during her lifetime. He didn't talk about how much money Joanne had contributed to their household

budget from her jobs at several different insurance offices downtown. He didn't mention the square footage or assessed value of the home they lived in at Beadle Lake. He talked about how hard his wife worked to provide a good life for their family. He talked about the vacations they took together and the traveling he and Joanne got to do when they were retired and the kids were all grown. He talked about the companionship they enjoyed during a lifetime together.

Life seems clearest to us at the beginning and at the end of the journey. Those are often the times when we realize that possessions matter least and relationships matter most. Sometimes in the middle, we seem to lose sight of what really matters and what really doesn't.

That is the parable that Jesus told in our passage this morning. The text that Ron read for us from Luke's gospel is known as the Parable of the Rich Fool. It begins with an argument between two brothers and a request for Jesus to arbitrate the dispute between them over their inheritance. It is the people in the middle of life's journey who always seem to squabble over the material possessions left behind when family members die. Jesus refused to act as judge in the dispute but he did issue a warning to the family members: "Be on your guard against all kinds of greed, for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions."

And then he told a story about a rich fool who had lost track of the things that matter most in life.

He was a farmer whose land was so fertile and his harvests so abundant that his barns weren't big enough to store up all of his surplus crops, so he devoted his life to building bigger barns, becoming wealthier and wealthier in the process. When he accumulated more wealth than he could ever spend on himself in his lifetime, the farmer thought he had things made. He was looking forward to enjoying a life

of leisure. Finally, he could sit back and enjoy the fruits of his labor.

What is tragic about the story that Jesus told is not the farmer's pre-mature death, but how alone he was when he died. The rich farmer was a fool because his life had been preoccupied with hoarding wealth for himself. No one else is even mentioned in the story: no family members that he was providing for, no community that he was helping to feed, no charity that he was supporting with his surplus. The rich fool had the potential to make a tremendous impact on the welfare of others, but he kept everything he had to himself and hoarded his surplus by building bigger barns. The tragedy wasn't that he died prematurely. The tragedy was that he died alone.

Hording always isolates us. Sharing always draws us closer to each other. Sometimes in the middle of life we get so preoccupied with accumulating possessions that we end up living lonely isolated lives.

I've met with a lot of young parents to plan baptismal celebrations for their newborn sons and daughters. In all of the conversations I've had with young couples who were just starting their families, I've never once had someone say to me that everything would be great for them if they just had a little more money. It is always about wanting more time to be with their baby. They talk about how hard it is to go back to work after maternity leave has ended, how much they pleasure they get just watching their baby sleep, how much they wish they could spend all day every day just being at home with their baby.

I've met with a lot of widows and widowers to plan their spouse's funerals. In all those conversations I've never once had a surviving spouse tell me that things would have been much better for them if they only had a little more money, or a bigger home, or a newer car. They always talk about how precious the time was that they shared together, they

pull out photographs of some of the most meaningful experiences that they shared together and they acknowledge that they would give anything to have even a little more time to be together.

Life seems clearest to us at the beginning and at the end of the journey. When we are just starting out in life and when our lives are coming to an end, that is when we seem to realize what really matters and what really doesn't. "Be on your guard against all kinds of greed," said Jesus, "for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions." Amen.

