



“Chasing Happiness”
Sermon preached by Anne R. Ledbetter
August 1, 2010
Scripture – Luke 12:13-21

Today’s scripture passage cautions us to re-examine the value we place on wealth and possessions. A man tells Jesus to direct his brother to divide the family inheritance with him. Jesus quickly declares that he is not a judge, and issues a warning against greed. While the brother’s request seems valid to us, in Jesus’ day he would have been seen as selfish, grasping for wealth. You see, reducing the family's inheritance for personal gain was thought in that day to be greedy. Jesus issues a pithy and pointed warning to us all: be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of possessions. What place do possessions have in our lives?

I read of a man in Southern California who had a lovely home filled with fine furniture, expensive rugs, the latest entertainment equipment, closets of clothes, and so on. One of those sudden forest fires swept through his area and destroyed everything. When a reporter asked how he felt, the man responded “I’m free!” Clearly his possessions had become a burden for him rather than a blessing. What about your worldly possessions? Do they in some way possess you?

My son Evans sent an email from the Congo this week and wrote of Christine, age 24, who with her brother and their cousin has established a vocational training school for street children. In 2004 Christine’s family and their neighbors were told to flee their homes because of the heightened activity of a nearby volcano. Immediately they grabbed the most expensive thing they owned - a nice chair or TV – and fled over the border to Rwanda. From the hillside they watched as lava ran over their village, burning houses and blowing up gas stations.

They had to remain in Rwanda for three months, and could not return to their village for six months. Today Goma is built on the very lava rocks that destroyed their homes. Christine thought that if they kept the door locked, the house would be fine. Little did she know the entire house would be destroyed! As a result her family didn't take the things that mattered most to them, like pictures from when they were young. In haste the villagers had swept up the most expensive items from their homes, but not what was most valuable to them. What would you grab from your home – family members and pets excluded – if you had to flee? Those who have worked on rebuilding homes along the Gulf Coast since Katrina have heard stories of what many families lost, and in terms of possessions, the dearest casualties were often a family Bible, personal letters, or photographs of loved ones.

A missionary couple remembers their sojourn to Indonesia. Each member of the family could only bring two suitcases, but they had stuffed them with clothes and keepsakes and necessary items for survival away from civilization. The Indonesians who welcomed them displayed shocked at their bulging luggage, commenting on all the “barang” or stuff. After five years in the East Asia, the missionary family eventually embarked on their return journey back to the states. In five years they had accumulated many beautiful things from Indonesia, and so in addition to their luggage, they had boxes and boxes of precious Island keepsakes. Tragically their vessel caught fire, and all on board were evacuated to lifeboats. Watching the flames engulf the ship as it sank, the husband lamented, “There goes everything we have.” But the wife slowly shook her head saying, “No, we have each other, and all of that is simply *barang*.”

We live in a culture that thrives on consumerism, and thus preaches “buy, buy, buy.” In order to sell more products, advertisers convince us that we need certain items in order to live and be happy. To be healthy, eat this cereal, to be sexy drive this car, to be blissful buy an ipod, to be successful purchase this computer, to have a cheery home fill it with items from this catalogue. Seduced by advertisers and our consumerist culture, we are prone to believe that we need certain things in order to be happy.

Jesus warns that chasing happiness through our possessions, our stuff, our *barang*, will bring us up short. It will not create a full, satisfying life – a deep inner contentment. That is, it will not breed happiness.

The study of human happiness has grown in recent years, possibly because psychologists have noted that a higher standard of living does not coincide with greater happiness. In three and a half decades the real per capita income in the US rose more than 60%, yet the percentage of Americans describing themselves as “very happy” or “pretty happy” remained the same. In Nigeria with a \$1400 per capita Gross Domestic Product the proportion of people rating themselves as happy equals that in Japan where the GDP per capita is 25 times more. Bangladeshis reports being two times as happy as Russians, but Russians are four times as rich. Panamanians rate themselves twice as happy as Argentines do, but Argentines have double the income.¹

Those who have traveled on mission trips often experience this phenomenon first-hand. I recall church members returning from Guatemala and exclaiming, “These people didn’t have anything, but they worshipped with joy and their faith was vibrant.” Other who have visited the DRC report that the Congolese are the poorest people they have ever seen, yet they are cheerful and wonderful hosts, cooking what little they have and insisting their guests eat first.

As business giants poise themselves for the new consumerism they hope will be sparked in China, I shudder to think how we may be infecting the world with the virulent and fatal disease: American Affluenza – a desperate hunger for material possessions. Its symptoms include measuring worth by what we own or what owns us.

Jesus warns us that happiness does not come from amassing wealth. Indeed, when we succumb to materialism - chasing happiness in property and possessions – we risk not only *not* finding happiness, but also losing our soul. So what does produce human happiness? According to the numerous books at Borders and plentiful websites on the subject, personal happiness may boil down to three primary behaviors:

1. to love and be loved
2. to become meaningfully connected in community
3. to contribute positively to the world

As Christians we find these three concepts in the Jewish Torah, which Rabbi Jesus summarized this way: Love God with all your heart, soul, and might, and Love your neighbor as yourself.” Love, connect, serve. We learn in life that happiness begins not with something we attain or possess, but something which begins within us, a knowledge that God **loves us**, and calls us to share that love.

Love, connect, serve. It sounds simple, but it proves challenging on a daily basis. Cultivating happiness does not happen in isolation, which was part of the problem for the rich fool. Did you notice that he is the only person in the parable? He has to have workers, a family, neighbors, but all we hear him talk about is his grain, goods and barns. When he speaks, he speaks to himself, to his soul. He seems to be living in isolation, or at least he has only thoughts of himself. But God's voice breaks in – the only time God speaks directly to someone in one of Luke's parables – and God calls him *a fool*, not for his plan to build bigger barns, but because the farmer thinks they will make him secure. Wisdom teaches us to live each day like it may be our last, because it might. Jesus would say that our soul's security rests in our relationship with Abba God – the one who made us and calls us “Beloved.” Love, love, love. Do you see any sign of love, connection or service in the rich fool's life?

Love, connect, serve. Living out our faith takes practice. It takes prayer and patience, education and exhortation, community and accountability, repentance and recommitment, nurture and nourishment.

Did I mention that studies show that those who participate in a faith community experience a higher degree of happiness than those who do not? Go figure. Or better yet, go plant some seeds of the gospel so that more people may experience the abundant life God desires for us.

ⁱ Kolbert, Elizabeth “Everybody Have Fun” pp.72-74, *The New Yorker*, March 22, 2010