

Be Rich Toward God

Sermon for July 31, 2022

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You may have heard that the Mega Millions lottery soared to an astronomical pot of \$1.3 billion on Friday. That night there was one winning ticket in the Mega Millions lottery drawing. Sometime in the last few days a person in Illinois bought that ticket that won them \$1.3 billion. I'm sure they had given some passing thought about what they might do if they won even while thinking the odds of winning were slim. Even after taxes the winner will walk away with hundreds of millions of dollars; so much money that they could acquire for themselves anything that they ever wished for. What will they use the money for? Will they use it for themselves? Will they use it to help others?

If you won over a billion dollars what would you do with it? A friend asked this question on Facebook yesterday. Many people commented on her post that they would build a new home or move to a new place and that they would travel. Many also planned to use the money for the good of others. Some people said that they would help their family members. Several people said that they would open or help animal rescues. A few said they would give money to their churches. One wanted to help end poverty and another wanted to build a women's shelter for victims of domestic abuse.

A few minutes ago in the gospel we encountered the foolish farmer. Like the person who won the Mega Millions Friday evening and now will need to make decisions about what to do with their newfound wealth, the farmer in Jesus' parable has also made choices about what to do with the wealth that he has. After having an abundant harvest, the farmer asks himself:

'What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?' 'I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul, 'Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.'

The farmer has worked hard and has been successful. He has enough to last him for many years of relaxation and merriment. Yet God calls him a fool saying,

'You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?' So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God."

The man had such an abundant crop that the barns he already had were no longer sufficient to store that crop. At that point he had a choice to make. He could store what he could fit in his existing barns and still have had a sufficient amount for himself. And then he could have given what did not fit in the barns to those who had need of it. Or he could keep everything for himself by tearing down his barns and building bigger ones. And having chosen the second choice God says he a fool.

If I had to guess I would say that most of us have done something after which we felt foolish, hopefully nothing as big as what this farmer did. I remember clearly almost 20 years ago at work I was emailing back and forth with a colleague about a fairly minor matter. I was certain I was correct. I was insistent on my point of view. They were wrong. They needed to do it the way I said. Well you guessed it; I was wrong. Completely, totally wrong. Oh how foolish I felt when I realized that I was wrong. And most of the times when I have been a fool, it has been because of a decision that I made or something I did. Just as the farmer is a fool because of the choices that he has made.

You may have noticed that God does not call the man greedy or bad or selfish for accumulating wealth. God calls him a fool because while he has accumulated earthly goods he has failed to also develop rich relationships with God and others. The man is a fool because he had a flawed understanding of what his soul needed to truly be fulfilled. It was not the ability to relax, eat, drink, and be merry that the man's soul needed. Jesus tells us the foolish farmer and his soul needed to be "rich toward God."

I spent a lot of time pondering this phrase "rich toward God" as I worked on my sermon. I kept asking myself what it means to be rich toward something and in particular toward God and what kept occurring to me was that God calls us to live from a place of abundance. Not an abundance of worldly things, but abundant life in Christ. Several years ago when I lived in Pennsylvania I was part of the abundant life: evangelism and stewardship Commission for the Diocese of Pennsylvania. We had chosen to use the words "abundant life" to reflect the fact that all that we have comes from God and that in grateful response to God's abundance to us we are called to abundantly give of ourselves to God and to our neighbors.

God's abundance is all around us. It's in God's great love for us, in God's sacrifice of God's son Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of our sins and our salvation, in the great commandment that Jesus gave to us to love God and to love our neighbors, and through the Holy Spirit whom Jesus sent to us to be an advocate for and with us for always. Having received so richly from God we are called to share that richness with others. To be rich toward God is to be faithful to God's commandments and to love God's people.

Last fall as part of my diaconal discernment process, I did an internship at the Church of the Guardian Angel in the Remington neighborhood of Baltimore. The church has been in that neighborhood for over 100 years. The congregation itself is small and their financial resources are limited. And yet I would say that they exemplify being rich toward God. They take what they have, and they give it to meet the needs of the community of which they are a vital part. Guardian Angel runs a weekly food pantry, has a thriving thrift store, and there is much more that they do. They offer abundantly all that they have and are to the people that they are called to serve.

Take a moment and look around at the people seated near you. You are part of the richness toward God that lives here at Christ Church whether you're visiting for the first time or have been here for a few years or many years. Our richness toward God is expressed in the many ways that we offer love to God and our neighbors. We are rich toward God on occasions such as yesterday morning when parishioners gathered in the basement of the parish house to stuff bags with school supplies provided by the parish for students at Lake Elkhorn middle school.

We are rich toward God as we continue to help and support the Afghan family who came to us at the beginning of the year. A family driven into exile from their homeland just as Joseph, Mary and Jesus were so many years ago.

We are rich toward God when we pray together and for each other and the concerns of the world in the prayers of the people written each week by members of our congregation who offer their richness toward God through this ministry and when the members of the Christ Church prayer group spend intentional time praying for those on our prayer list.

We are rich toward God when we welcome visitors into our midst. We are rich toward God when we stand and say that we reject racism. We are rich toward God when we publicly affirm that we welcome our LGBTQ+ siblings in Christ. We are rich toward God when we love one another whatever our differences.

My school motto was *Esse Quam Videri*: to be rather than to seem to be. In the context of our gospel the person who seems to be is the farmer. To the world he seems to have it all, to have so much wealth that he is ready to retire, relax and be merry. And yet God says he is a fool. He has put all the focus of his life on only one aspect of life, the accumulation of treasure, while neglecting to also be rich toward God. We do not have to be foolish like the farmer who only seemed to be living an abundant life.

We can be by living a life that is rich toward God. We can live a life that is rich toward God by following the great commandments to love God and to love our neighbor. We can live a life that is rich toward God by following the beatitudes. We can live a life that is rich toward God by living our baptismal covenant and continuing in the apostles teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in the prayers; by persevering in resisting evil, and when we sin by repenting and returning to the Lord; by proclaiming by word and example the Good News of God in Christ; by seeking and serving Christ in all persons loving our neighbors as ourselves; and by striving for justice and peace among all people and respecting the dignity of every human being.

My brothers and sisters in Christ, may God be abundantly present in your life, and may God call you to a life that is rich toward God. Amen.

