

Rich Toward God

(Sermon by Rev. John Dieterly, August 1, 2010)

Hosea 11:1 – 11 ¹ When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son.
² The more I called them, the more they went from me;
They kept sacrificing to the Baals, and offering incense to idols.
³ Yet it was I who taught Ephraim to walk,
I took them up in my arms; but they did not know that I healed them.
⁴ I led them with cords of human kindness, with bands of love.
I was to them like those who lift infants to their cheeks.
I bent down to them and fed them.
⁵ They shall return to the land of Egypt, and Assyria shall be their king,
Because they have refused to return to me.
⁶ The sword rages in their cities, it consumes their oracle-priests, and devours because of their schemes.
⁷ My people are bent on turning away from me.
To the Most High they call, but he does not raise them up at all.
⁸ How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, O Israel?
How can I make you like Admah? How can I treat you like Zeboiim?
My heart recoils within me; my compassion grows warm and tender.
⁹ I will not execute my fierce anger; I will not again destroy Ephraim;
For I am God and no mortal, the Holy One in your midst, and I will not come in wrath.
¹⁰ They shall go after the LORD, who roars like a lion;
When he roars, his children shall come trembling from the west.
¹¹ They shall come trembling like birds from Egypt, and like doves from the land of Assyria;
And I will return them to their homes, says the LORD.

Luke 12:13-21 ¹³ Someone in the crowd said to him, “Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me.” ¹⁴But he said to him, “Friend, who set me to be a judge or arbitrator over you?” ¹⁵And he said to them, “Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.” ¹⁶Then he told them a parable: “The land of a rich man produced abundantly. ¹⁷And he thought to himself, ‘What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?’ ¹⁸Then he said, ‘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. ¹⁹And I will say to my soul, Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.’ ²⁰But God said to him, ‘You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?’ ²¹So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God.”

What does it mean, to be “rich toward God?” These are the concluding words of Jesus in our parable this morning, which I have used as the sermon title. I am sure we could each come up with an answer to that question, but sometimes you can best understand something by knowing what it is not. Jesus used this technique with his parable of the rich man, who certainly was not rich toward God. We have all heard this parable before, and we may have heard similar stories inspired by this parable.

The famous Russian writer, Leo Tolstoy, spent the 2nd half of his life writing on religious and moral themes. One of his stories “How Much Land Does a Man Need?” seems similar to Jesus’ parable. The main character in the story is a small farmer by the name of Pakhom. Pakhom is poor but he thinks that if he could just get more land, his problems would be solved. The one line that Pakhom speaks early in the story is, “If I only had as much land as I wanted, I shouldn’t be afraid of anyone, even of the devil!” Soon after Pakhom speaks this line he has the opportunity to purchase a neighboring piece of land and expand his holdings. At first, he is pleased and proud of his expanded farm, but in time he becomes disheartened again. So when an opportunity comes, he sells all his belongings and moves to a larger place, with more land and more potential for generating wealth. Again, he is pleased with his newer, larger farm, but it doesn’t take long for dissatisfaction to set in. Then he hears about a place far away where huge tracts of empty land are opening. The arrangement was that he could have all the land he could walk around in a day, and whatever it was, he would only have to pay 1,000 rubles. Pakhom becomes very excited and says, “What I can walk around in a day is a good deal of land.” And so Pakhom travels to that land, makes all the arrangements, pays his money, and at

dawn on the set day is taken to a starting point by the directors of the program. At the signal, Pakhom started out at a very brisk pace, walking on and on until the sun was high. He then turned sharply to the left and continued on for as long as he thought best, then turned again. He was starting to feel a bit tired and realized that he would have to cut this third side a bit shorter, because he had walked a bit too far on the first two sides to get as much land as he could. Finally he had to turn for the fourth side and head back to the starting place. He had to get to the starting point or else he would not get the land and forfeit his 1,000 rubles. This was the hardest leg of his day and he began to have some second thoughts: "Is it possible that I have made a blunder? Can I have taken too much? I better hurry." He could not stop to rest. He saw the sun was already low on the horizon, and he had to be back to the start before it set. He started to run, faster and faster. His legs ached, sweat poured off him, breathing was labored, but he had to run even faster. As the last glow of the sun was still just over the horizon he saw the end point ahead and heard a small crowd of people gathered there begin to cheer. This inspired him to run even harder so that he arrived at the end point, panting and groaning, just as the last rays of the sun disappeared behind the horizon. He heard the cheers of the crowd at the same time that his legs collapsed and he fell forward and died, right there at the finish line. Of course, he received his reward, all the land he needed – a plot 7 feet long, just enough for a grave. You may know other stories that tell this parable from a different perspective, but the lesson is the same.

The incident that prompted Jesus to tell his parable almost seems disconnected from the context. A man in the crowd was being cheated. His brother, apparently, had taken the entire estate of the family, and was not sharing it with his brother, as clearly described by law, and I would add, not just civil law, but the Jewish Law, what the people thought of as God's Law. We might even say that there was a justice issue here. We might even agree that the church should speak out against such injustice if it were to occur today. But Jesus saw that it was all about things – material things – stuff! So Jesus told the parable to help the man, and all his listeners, understand that material things are not the most important things in life. After the same sad conclusion to the parable as in the story of Pakhom, Jesus goes on to advise his listeners to be rich toward God.

How can we do that? Let me suggest three things. First, turn off greed. How much land does a man need? Ultimately, just a plot 7 feet long. How many possessions must one have? Look at all your "stuff" sometime and ask, "How much of this do I really need?" I am afraid this can cause all of us to squirm a little. Second, learn to enjoy without possessing. Malcolm Forbes, the well known magazine publisher, collected Faberge eggs. He loved to show off his collection to whoever was interested. One of his friends, a wealthy Japanese businessman, loved to see his collection and often spent hours admiring the eggs. One day Forbes asked his Japanese friend why he didn't start collecting Faberge eggs himself. The businessman replied, "Malcolm, you are my friend and generous enough to show me these eggs whenever I want to see them. Art is to see and enjoy. I can enjoy what you own anytime – I do not need to be an owner." Can you do that? Can you share what you have with others? Can you enjoy what others would like to share with you?

Third, consider how **you** might build up those things that are Godly, such as the church and the ministries of the church. We have done some very significant things here at Peace Church in recent years. Through our missions of the month, homeless have been sheltered, the hungry have been fed, victims of disasters, such as the earthquake in Haiti, have been given relief, children in the Philippines, Haiti and Botswana have been helped to stay in school, and the list could go on. It is wonderful to see how so many of you step forward to support these programs. But I also see some who are holding back. I am sure that not everyone is doing everything they can, or giving as much as they could.

Now I am sure there are some among us, perhaps all of us, who feel a bit uncomfortable when the pastor talks about possessions and money. But remember, Jesus didn't shy away from talking about money. He was very bold when he talked about the widow's mite, the rich young ruler, and in our lesson for today, the foolish rich man. Love of money, accumulating possessions, building bigger barns, is never approved by God. Our culture and actions deserve the same judgement and wrath of God that Hosea prophesied. We need to change our ways because we are on a hopeless path. It doesn't matter how much land we have, how many possessions, how much money, it never seems to be enough. Even JD Rockefeller, one of the richest men in America in his time, when he was asked, "How much money is enough?" replied, "Just a little more..."

This is how material things, land, harvests, money, "stuff" can consume us. We need to give more attention to building riches toward God. But it is hard – we like to be comfortable; we need our security. And yet, how much is enough? When do we stop accumulating, building bigger barns, trying to possess more, and when can we begin building our riches toward God?