

The Problem With Barns

Rev. John Allen

My colleagues often joke that if the United Church of Christ ever wanted to get rid of our retirement plan, they would have all the justification the needed in this parable of Jesus.

Jesus tells this parable about a man who has what we would think of as a 'good problem.'

Things are going great for him, the land is producing in such abundance that he is running out of room in his barns.

"What should I do?" He wonders to himself.

"Here's what. I will tear down my barns and build bigger ones, and then I will have room to store all my grain and my goods. Then I will be able to relax and be happy."

But that very night. He dies. And all those barns full to overflowing.

Well, you can't take it with you.

And so Jesus says, take care to remember that one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.

We ought not to store up treasures for ourselves without being rich towards God.

Now in many ways we might be tempted to think of this man as being wise. And there are certainly worse things he could have done with an abundance than save it up, he could have squandered it satisfying any number of vices. He could have lorded it over other. Or used it to purchase outsized influence or power.

But nothing like that, he just built a bigger barn, a prudent investment for the future. What's so bad about that. The only problem is that the future —for him— didn't come. Not in the way he expected, kicked back with his feet up, enjoying the good life.

But I don't think that this parable is criticizing prudence or planning. I do not think that it is a parable against saving, or even against investing.

This is a parable, like so many of Jesus' parables, that is critical of limited imagination.

This parable is a reply by Jesus to a voice that calls out to him from the crowd, with no context, and no detail. Someone who Jesus has never met before seems to want to traffic in his authority to resolve a family dispute.

"Teacher," he yells, "tell my brother he should give me part of the family inheritance."

And Jesus tells the story of the man and his barns.

Jesus is trying to teach this man in the crowd something.

Do you notice what word occurs over, and over, and over again in the parable?

What should **I** do?

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 the man in the crowd... tell my brother to share the inheritance, with **me**.

Think about everything else the man in the parable could have asked himself when his land outproduced his barns.

For example: I wonder if my neighbors are hungry?

The man's problem is not that he is an over-planner.

It is that in the face of abundance beyond his need, his imagination is limited to how best this abundance can serve him, and his needs.

And so it is with this brother in the crowd. Who, presumably just had his last living parent die, and he has a chance to speak with Jesus and his question is: “can you tell me brother to give me some of the inheritance.”

—

Is there something in your life that you have more of than you need?
Maybe its grain, but probably not.

Money? Time? Stability? Space?

—

I recently learned about a concept in personal financial planning called 'lifestyle creep.' It refers to a natural human psychological response to abundance. When people get a raise, it doesn't take long before they have constructed their life in a way where what they were making before seems like it wouldn't be enough.

Rather than the new abundance becoming an opportunity for imagination, it quickly sinks into a slightly more upscale version of one's old life.

—

This is the thought process Jesus is trying to interrupt. When we have more of something than we need, how can we break the old patterns of our hearts, and imagine what new possibility might exist?

Instead of a bigger and better version of the barn we have. What might God be inviting us to imagine?

How to we disciple our souls to recognize what is “enough.”

And how do we cultivate the imagination to allow abundance to not just become more of the same.

—

Now this could easy sound like a concern that is only available to the wealthy, or those whose lives are filled with time for leisure.

You life might not feel abundant. Your barns may in fact be rather empty. Still, I think Jesus call to imagination is a call to all of us.

What if you were about to have your first free afternoon in as long as you could remember. Four hours, all to yourself. For a lot of us that would be a minor miracle and a luxurious abundance.

I bet there is someone in your life who it would mean the world to if you spend 20 minutes on the phone with them. How about 3 hours and 40 minutes to yourself, would that really feel like much less?

It is important for all of us to take time to care for ourselves, and to adequately support our own needs, and its even ok to splurge every once in a while.

But when we are focusing on ourselves, there are rapidly diminishing returns.

My vice in this regard is rewatching old episodes of Seinfeld on Hulu. It is a common way for me to use any free time I can find. And watching an episode or two always helps me relax. But that third episode doesn't really add that much to me relaxation, and the forth I ultimately would scarcely notice, at that point I am really just stuck using my small abundance of free time rather unimaginatively.

When I muster the self-discipline to use some of that time for something beyond myself, the value added is a great many magnitudes more.

So here is the invitation. Exercise a little imagination in the face of even the smallest abundance.

Get a little extra cash bonus at some point? Use your imagination. Is there someplace outside yourself where a bit of this would go a much longer way than it will in your bank account?

Have a little spare time? Who could use a bit more of your attention than they have been getting? Have a little extra space in your home? Whose spirit would be refreshed by some hospitality?

Meet your abundance with some imagination. Not only will the world be a kinder and more beautiful place for it... But I think you will also be glad that you did.