

JESUS' PLAY CLOTHES
Sermon for Pentecost 11C—Lk 12:13-21
LPC, 8/4/13

Do you watch that TV show about hoarders? I confess I have never seen it. I gather the programs shows people with exaggerated cases of hoarding behavior, but one sees hoarding to a lesser extent among all kinds of people.

My mother just came into possession of her late sister's yarn collection. Mom says she could never use all the yarn if she knitted every moment of every day for the next twenty years. My aunt was a "normal" person in every other way; she just couldn't resist buying yarn.

Women who sew recognize the truth in the facetious adage: "Whoever dies with the most fabric wins." Men hoard stuff too. My father loved electronic gadgets. When he died we had to get rid of rooms of old machines and boxes of expired vacuum tubes. Nearly everyone has a story about cleaning out the kitchen of an elderly relative and finding pieces of saved aluminum foil.

In some cases, I am told, this kind of hoarding stems from periods of scarcity occurring during formative periods of the person's life. If you got into the habit of saving foil during the Second World War when all kinds of metal were scarce, you might never have stopped.

Hoarding can also result from trauma. I'm told that people who were kept as prisoners of war in unhygienic conditions are prone to hoard things like clean underwear or Clorox, apparently as an imagined safeguard against ever having to endure filth again.

Whatever the stem cause, the hoarders on the TV programs are extreme cases. However many normal people go to great lengths to save money or possessions against future want or need. It's just good stewardship to take care of what you have, and to make sensible provision for the future.

The reaction of the rich farmer in Jesus' story to the abundance of his harvest just does not seem that bad. Why does Jesus come down so hard on this guy? What has he done that's so bad? What is Jesus warning his disciples, and us, about? Is it hoarding or something else?

Hoarding is one possibility. Possibly also selfishness. Presumably this man could have shared of his abundance with hungry people. Perhaps also Jesus is criticizing the man's assumption that he has "arrived:" having enough food and drink for many years he assumes he can now relax and make no further effort.

The punch-line of story indicates that Jesus is most concerned with the faith the man has put in his material goods. The man's assumption that his wealth will protect him is false. It will be of no use to him when he dies, and apparently his death is immanent.

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He will never live to benefit from the trouble he has taken to protect his property. How much better off he would have been if he had placed his faith in something that would remain with him through the vicissitudes of life, stay with him past the point of his death, and benefit him in the life to come!

So Jesus' message to us is the same: put not your faith in earthly things. They will pass away. God alone abides. Place your confidence in God alone and you have insurance not only during this life, but in death and in the life beyond.

Does this mean we should cash in our insurance policies and retirement funds, give the proceeds to the poor, and throw ourselves entirely on the mercy of God? Well, some of us may be genuinely called to do that. I'm not ruling it out!

In case poverty is not your vocation, let us explore another option for being a faithful person of property. A simple discipline is all that is required. Simply remember that all this stuff is God's. Our property may have come to us through the accident of birth, or climate conditions conducive to a good harvest. It may have come to us through our own talents and effort and good sense, but where did those talents, that effort and that good sense come from initially? From God!

Remembering that everything comes from God is an excellent way to hold one's property lightly and make godly decisions about its disposition. In this way we are not owned by what we own. We care for our things appropriately but are not attached to them. We are generous and sharing, as God intends. We live better in this life and are prepared for the next.

Whenever we're tempted to think we don't have enough of anything: money, or time, a good antidote is to remember we never really had *anything* – it was always God's. Where there are people who truly have nothing, God intends that we share what God has entrusted to our care.

Interestingly, this is also an excellent treatment for having too much of something. We worry about having too much of our lives left when our money runs out. Or we have "too much to think about." Remembering that it is all God's takes the burden and responsibility of things beyond our control off our own narrow shoulders and gives them back to God, who owns them anyway.

When I was a mother of young children, the one thing I had too much of was laundry. One day it occurred to me to think of it as God's laundry: Sheets to furnish heavenly beds, Jesus' play-clothes. It put wash day in a whole new light.

Whether we have little or much, it is the Lord's. Whether we live or die, we are the Lord's. Render unto God the things that are God's.