

“San Bernardino & Beyond”

Luke 12:13-34 ¹

Linus sits sucking his thumb and holding his precious blanket, when suddenly Snoopy dashes by, clamps the blanket in his teeth, and dashes out the door, dragging Linus with him. There is deep snow on the ground, and Linus trips and falls, clinging to the blanket for dear life. Snoopy pounces on him, and they have a rough-and-tumble tug of war. When Linus finally prevails and goes back inside, exhausted, Lucy scolds him: “Are you crazy? You could catch pneumonia rolling around out there in the snow!” Linus thinks a moment before responding, **“The struggle for security knows no season.”**

This sermon has had several titles on the way to this moment. The first title was “The Kingdom’s Coming is a Crisis.” This *Peanuts* vignette suggested the title, “Where Your Blanket Is, There Will Your Heart Be Also.” But this week’s mass murder in San Bernardino changed all that.

I don’t know what Californians think of San Bernardino, but for many of us outside of California, San Bernardino has long been known as the home of Campus Crusade for Christ. After this week, though, it will conjure other memories.

Those who study such things tell us that there have been more “mass shootings” involving more than four deaths each in the U.S. this year than there have been days in the year. The recent terrorist attacks in Paris have made many of us feel less safe, and while we’re still relatively safe within our own borders, Sandy Hook, Charleston, and San Bernardino—among literally hundreds of other examples—collide with our denial and remind us that violent death may be stalking us at any moment.

If Linus is right that “the struggle for security knows no season,” and I think he is, **what’s your “blanket”?** To what or to whom are you clinging as illusions of personal safety erode away one by one?

While the text that we’ve read from Luke 12 is a familiar one, I’d like to invite your attention to the encounter that preceded our text and that led to the teaching Jesus gave there. The encounter is found in Luke 12:13-21, and only Luke recorded it:

Someone in the crowd said to [Jesus], “Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me.”

Jesus replied, “Man, who appointed me a judge or an arbiter between you?” Then he said to them, “Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; life does not consist in an abundance of possessions.”

And he told them this parable: “The ground of a certain rich man yielded an abundant harvest. He thought to himself, ‘What shall I do? I have no place to store my crops.’

“Then he said, ‘This is what I’ll do. I will tear down my barns and build bigger ones, and there I will store my surplus grain. And I’ll say to myself, ‘You have plenty of grain laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink, and be merry.’”

“But God said to him, ‘You fool!’ This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?’ This is how it will be with whoever stores up things for themselves but is not rich toward God.”²

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, MD on December 6, 2015.

² In my Bible, the heading over these verses reads, “The Parable of the Rich Fool.” Now in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus issued a strong warning about the word, “fool.” There he said, “Anyone who

The Journey of Advent is always a bi-focal undertaking. We can only understand the manger in Bethlehem if we also keep our minds focused on the mission and ministry that the manger inaugurated. And this particular encounter has something important to say to us both in the context of Advent and in these days after San Bernardino. Let's consider it for a bit.

The person who came to Jesus asking, "*Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me.*" was probably a younger brother. In those days, the oldest son got a double portion of the inheritance (Deuteronomy 21:17), and it seems likely that this request was a protest against that ancient practice.

Rather than taking on the older brother, or even the custom of double-inheritance, Jesus offered the younger brother insight into the real issues that were at work in his question. And if we have ears to hear, Jesus' answer just might have something to say to us as well.

Jesus began by identifying the root problem as one not of inequity, but of greed—one of those seven attitudes of the heart that the Church has identified across the centuries as "deadly sins."³ "*Watch out!*" Jesus said. *Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; life does not consist in an abundance of possessions.*" And then Jesus told a parable that both illustrated this point and gives us God's definition of what a "fool" is.

The parable tells of a wealthy man whose farm produced bumper crops year after year. Jesus doesn't tell us whether or not the farm produced well because the land was fertile, because the farmer worked hard, or both. He doesn't tell us whether the farmer had scrimped and saved to buy this farm or whether he had inherited it from his father.

But to tell the truth, this parable is pretty scary. It's frightening because it's really not very hard to imagine myself in a situation similar to that of the rich man in this story. The scenario is not all that far-fetched. Think about it: when our basements, attics, and garages have become full to overflowing, how many times have you and I given some of our stuff away, compared to the number of times we've rented U-store-it space, built storage sheds in the back yard, or moved into larger houses? Was that sinful? Maybe so, maybe not.

According to William Barclay, a schoolboy was once asked what parts of speech "my" and "mine" are. We all learned in high school that the correct answer to that question is "possessive pronouns," but the boy answered, "They're 'aggressive' pronouns." The lad was more correct than he knew, and I think he may have given us a clue that helps us see the point Jesus was making with this parable.

As we make our way through our Christmas shopping and various holiday events, *The Parable of the Rich Fool* provides a somewhat startling evaluation of a life wrapped up in pleasure and possessions. Jesus told us that such a life is surprisingly vulnerable, and that in the end, it's entirely unprotected. That's not something *Money* magazine is going to tell you. People wrapped up in themselves make pretty small packages. *Money* magazine won't tell you that, either. The things of this world, while they are, for the most part, good gifts from God, offer no protection from the San Bernardino events of life.

It seems to me that this farmer made two mistakes, the first of which was presumption. There's a stark irony in the farmer's spending his last day on earth planning a long and leisurely

says, 'You fool!' will be in danger of the fire of hell" (Matthew 5:22). That teaching deserves its own study, but in a nutshell, Jesus is telling us that the title of "fool" is one you and I are not qualified or authorized to assign to each other. Only God can define what a fool is, and here Jesus gives us God's definition of the term.

³ The other six are anger, lust, envy, sloth (laziness), gluttony, and pride.

future. Jesus told us that a “fool” is a person who thinks they are completely in control of their own future, a person whose life is organized around “stuff” rather than around a rich relationship with God.

An ambitious young man and an older, wiser man were talking. The young man said, “I’m setting out to learn my trade exceptionally well.”

“And then?” said the older man.

“I’ll establish myself in business.”

“And then?”

“I’ll become very wealthy.”

“And then?”

“I suppose that I shall retire and grow old, living on my money.”

“And then?”

“Well, I suppose that some day I will die.”

“And then?”

We all know at some level that whether or not we find ourselves caught up in events like Paris or San Bernardino, the number of our days is uncertain for us all. We tend to think that life and death are linear; that death is out in front of us, and most likely at some distance. But the truth is that we live our lives alongside the very boundary of eternity. Only one heartbeat separates us from that boundary, and however young and healthy or wealthy and important we may be, we are never, ever far from it.

Now the awareness of the nearness and the inevitability of death is actually a very helpful thing. The gift death offers is an urgency that exposes the superficiality of many—maybe most—of the concerns on which we spend our precious allotment of days. If we allow it to do so, the awareness of death’s approach can greatly improve our “Christmasing.” This awareness can propel us to get on with “a life that matters” before the night falls. That’s one of the reasons I take one of these beads out and throw it away every Sunday morning—so I don’t forget to pay attention to each and every day.

You and I must live well in the present, for today and its opportunities will not come again. Today is a gift. That’s why we call it “the present.” We surely know this, but this parable and this week’s events urgently remind us that if we pour our best energies into stockpiling material goods for the future, we may forever miss the gifts God intended to give us in the here-and-now.

The farmer’s second mistake was selfishness. When the earth yielded exceptional crops, it never occurred to him that his prosperity was a gift from God and a stewardship from God, for which God would require an accounting. The farmer’s affection for the “aggressive” pronouns (“my” and “mine”) caused him to think that wealth had come into his life so that he could spend it on himself. He looked for joy in constant privilege, in the perquisites of power, in the incessant gratification of his own desires.

The farmer misunderstood his abundance as being earned and deserved rather than as a stewardship. He raised the right question—“What should I do?”—but he gave the wrong answer. Fortunately, there’s another way. If we have eyes to see and ears to hear, this parable hints at ways in which material abundance can actually lead us toward joy, not just at Christmas, but all year long.

This parable is really a call to us for whom the death summons has not yet come to build different kinds of barns and to throw different kinds of parties. It's not by accident that this parable is situated just before Jesus' central teaching about "worry." If we didn't already have enough to worry about, Paris and San Bernardino may have ratcheted things up nearly to the level of panic for some of us.

In the midst of such anxiety, hear once more these words from the Master: "Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life or become anxious about the evil that runs rampant in the world-as-it-is. Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to your life? Do not be afraid, for your Father has been pleased to give you the kingdom. Sell your possessions and give to the poor. Provide resources for yourselves that will not wear out, a treasure in heaven that will never be destroyed by the stock market, where no terrorists lie in wait, and where no disease destroys. Put your treasure in heaven, not on earth, for where your security blanket is, there your heart will be also (paraphrased)."

So where's your "blanket"? All of the holiday hoopla notwithstanding, life really isn't about cars, houses, computers, vacations, degrees, cool widgets, awesome clothes, or great jobs. Life is about *relationships*, and relationships are about *time*.

Many studies have shown that it is not at all uncommon for Americans to spend only two or three minutes a day talking to the important people in our lives . . . and that includes talking about the weather as well as about deeper things. Does anybody *really* know you? Do you really know *yourself*? Do you have anyone with whom to share your deepest thoughts, fears, hopes and dreams?

Instagram isn't going to cut it. Social media relationships won't do it. Young people, how do you expect your parents to understand you if you don't ever really talk to them about anything that matters? How do any of us think we're ever going to know God if we don't spend any time with God? I wonder what an unbiased observer would conclude is the real location of your faith and trust? Where's your blanket?

And so it is that the Kingdom's coming presents each of us with a crisis, with an inescapable decision. Will you choose to spend your days as the "Rich Fool" did, with presumption and selfish materialism? I hope not. God has better plans for you.

My friends, I challenge you to spend at least twenty minutes every day this month nurturing the important relationships in your life. Spend the first ten minutes nurturing your relationship with God, and the other ten minutes nurturing relationships that matter to you. You might find that you enjoy it. You might want to set aside more time. You might even find that you want to continue setting such priorities in the New Year.

Let me gently remind you that it is only in soul friendship with Jesus that we find an anchor for our lives that no terrorist gunfire can dislodge. Paul knew what it meant to live in constant physical danger, yet it was he who asked, "*Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? . . . I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord*" (Romans 8:35-39).

My friends, as we live through San Bernardino and beyond, keep your eyes on the Savior, not on life's storms: "In Christ alone my hope is found, He is my light, my strength, my song; this Cornerstone, this solid Ground, firm through the fiercest drought and storm. What heights of

love, what depths of peace, when fears are stilled, when strivings cease! My Comforter, my All in All, here in the love of Christ I stand.”⁴

And all God’s people said, “Amen.”

⁴ Stuart Townend & Keith Getty, *In Christ Alone* (ThankYou Music, 2001).