

St Paul's, Concord
August 3 & 4, 2019
Luke 12:13-21
Rev Kate Atkinson

When I was in New York last week, I had lunch with a college friend and afterwards she walked me to the bus stop for the Concord Coach. As I was boarding the bus, a woman in the line suddenly fainted, and my friend and two other women rushed to help her. They got her up and gathered her things, but when my friend handed the woman's ticket to the driver, he said, "This is the wrong bus; the bus for Portland left fifteen minutes ago."

As we drove off, I could see the woman crying hysterically, and my friend punching numbers on her cell phone. When I texted her a bit later to find out what had happened, I got this reply:

"I put her in a car with another woman who missed the same bus and they are on their way to Portland! It all worked out okay!"

I couldn't understand why the other woman had been taking the bus if she had a car, and then it came to me. Not to put too fine a point on it, my friend and her husband have had very successful careers – actually, they're very wealthy. So my next text to my friend said this:

"YOU supplied the car, didn't you? Driver too? You are incredible!"

And my friend replied:

"I just got them an Uber on my account. It was not a big deal. She was headed to her husband's memorial service and there isn't another bus to Portland until tomorrow."

There's something so very moving about acts of generosity like this – and not necessarily because of their monetary value. An Uber from New York City to Portland, Maine, isn't cheap, but what's truly striking is that my friend gave this gift to two complete strangers, simply because she saw that they were in need and wanted to do what she could to help them.

Here's another example. As many of you know, our dear friend, Alan Topliff, died on Monday and we had his memorial service here yesterday. Reading through the many wonderful tributes to Alan, on the Funeral Home website, I came across this one:

Alan is a special guy! When we were a bit down on our luck, Alan organized a group of volunteers from the Pembroke Congregational Church to come to our house and cut, split, and stack a grapple load of wood so my family would have heat for the winter. At the time, I wasn't even a member of that church. But Alan found someone who needed help and came to our rescue. You will be sorely missed, my friend. May God bless your soul and keep your loved ones secure in the knowledge of what a nice man Alan K. Topliff is.

We live in a world where we're told, over and over, that we need money and possessions in order to find fulfillment. No matter how much we have, we find ourselves wanting more; there's

always something bigger and better that we believe we can't live without. And we hold tightly to what we have, convinced by the voices of marketers and advertisers that material wealth brings security.

But my friend in New York, our brother, Alan Topliff, and frankly, many other members of this congregation, can help us to see that there is another way; a better way.

At the start of our gospel passage, Jesus is approached by “someone in the crowd” demanding that Jesus order his brother to give him a share of the family inheritance. Not only does Jesus refuse to get involved, he also gives the man a powerful warning: “Take care!” he says. “Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.” (Luke 12:13-15)

Then Jesus proceeds to tell a parable about a rich and foolish farmer.

For reasons I've already mentioned – specifically our society's obsession with wealth and material status – it may be difficult for us to see why the man in the parable is judged to be a fool. By our world's standards, he's much more likely to be judged a success. After all, not only does he have a thriving farm, but he's also careful not to waste what he produces. In fact he's accumulated so much grain that he's run out of space in his storage barns! So, rather than condemning the man for being greedy and materialistic, we may be inclined to applaud him for his productivity and his responsible planning for the future.

But if we look more closely at the rich farmer, we see that there's more to the story. We see what Jesus wants us to see.

Notice the farmer's conversation with himself – with *himself*, mind you. There doesn't appear to be anyone else in this man's life – certainly not anyone whose opinions or desires he takes into account when he's making his plans. It's all about him: “What should *I* do,” he asks himself, “for *I* have no place to store *my* crops?” He goes on to say, “*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.’” (Luke 12:17-19)

This man may appear to be a sensible steward of his goods, but his motives make it clear that he is in fact the fool that God judges him to be. With no thought for anybody but himself, no gratitude to God for his success, no inclination to share what he has, no desire to make anything more of his life now that he's made his fortune, the rich man is happy to sit back, overindulge, and revel in his wealth.

God, on the other hand, has other plans: “You fool!” God says to him, “This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?” (Luke 12:20)

The writer of Ecclesiastes was on a similar track, when he described the arrogance of a person who works hard in order to accumulate wealth that they may not live to enjoy. We have no control over what our heirs do with our money and our possessions after we depart this life – or

in the words of Ecclesiastes: “Who knows whether they will be wise or foolish? Yet they will be master of all for which I toiled and used my wisdom under the sun. This also is vanity.” (Ecc. 2:19)

So it isn't the fact of the rich man's productivity, or his wealth, or even his planning for the future that makes him foolish. None of these things are wrong in themselves. After all, it makes sense to work hard, to be effective, to support ourselves and our families as best we can, and to ensure that we're not a burden on our loved ones when we can no longer earn a living. And there isn't anything wrong with enjoying the fruits of our labor; eating, drinking and being merry from time to time. Even Jesus did that!

But the rich man only lives for himself. And when his life comes to an end unexpectedly, he has nothing to show for it. Jesus' parable tells us that when we lose sight of our responsibilities as people of faith, when we allow ourselves to be seduced by the world's obsession with looking after number one, and when we forget that God is the source of all that's truly important in our lives, that's when we're in danger of falling into the same trap as that rich and foolish farmer.

And, although the parable may be explicitly about wealth and material possessions, Jesus is teaching us how to employ *every* gift we receive from God. When my friend helped the two women get to Portland, she wasn't only being generous with her money. And neither was Alan, when he and his friends provided firewood for a family in need.

In both these instances, and in many more examples I see daily, here at St. Paul's, what we're observing is generosity of spirit. It's *that* kind of generosity that brings true fulfillment to our lives. It's that kind of generosity that transforms the lives of the people around us. It's that kind of generosity that can heal our society and our world.

In his letter, that went out with the Weekly Update on Friday, Bishop Rob wrote this:

“We (must) recognize that the greatness of any society lies not in its material gross domestic product, or the performance of its stock markets, or even in the might of its military. Greatness lies in a nation's soul: that resilient self-understanding that it has been placed here to extend justice, compassion, prosperity, and opportunity for all...”