

Scott Sprunger
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Good morning, CMCL.

It's so good to be worshipping with you this morning. You know, it was three years ago this month that you sent me off to attend seminary in New York City. What followed were three incredibly transformative years. I entered seminary with more than my fair share of questions. For some of those questions, I received answers. But for the most part I traded them in for bigger and better questions. At seminary I walked in protests and Pride marches. I came to know Jesus more deeply and more intimately through my friendships with people who are not even Christian. I wrote good papers weeks before they were due, but I wrote my *best* papers the night before they were due. I shared meals with people who live in penthouses and people who live on street corners. I found God in unexpected places, or perhaps I should say it was God who found me.

And then, this May, I graduated, having been changed forever.

But not one week later I got an email from my student loan servicer. It said: Dear Scott, congratulations on graduating. Period. We look forward to the successful repayment of your student loans.

And then I learned something else. That no matter how deeply spiritual we are, the issue of money and finances always hangs over our heads.

I feel like this is the point at the beginning of the sermon where I should make a quick disclaimer that I'll be talking about money today. So if you want to make a quick run for the exit, I'm sure nobody will judge you.

There's a little statistic that we preachers like to use every now and then, that says that Jesus said more about money than he did about love. In fact, Jesus talked about money more than any other topic. I don't think it's because Jesus was obsessed with money. But I do think that he knew something about us as people. And this is true of any individual, or church, or politician, or business, or nonprofit- what we do with what we have been given says far more about us than the words that come out of our mouth.

In today's scripture, Jesus is addressing thousands of people who have gathered simply to hear him talk. All of a sudden, out of the crowd, a man shouts out: "Hey

Jesus. Tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me.” Those of you grew up with siblings know exactly what this is like.

But Jesus refuses. You see, in first century Palestine, it was the role of rabbis to interpret the Mosaic law to settle disputes between people. But Jesus says, “I am not that kind of Rabbi.” And instead of handing out a ruling, he tells a story.

There once was a rich man who owned a very large parcel of land. One year, that land yielded an abundant harvest. When he saw all of the crops that were being brought in from the field, he realized that he had more food than even his capacity to store it. So that day he resolved to tear down his barns and in their place build even bigger ones so that he could live the rest of his life in luxury. But on the very night that he had finished building his newer, larger barns, he died, unable to enjoy the abundance his land had produced.

Now you can imagine the confusion of those thousands of people as they heard this story. Jesus told a lot of parables but he rarely explained them. And most of the time, there are multiple ways to interpret the same story. Is Jesus, telling this guy not to worry about the inheritance? Or is he warning the brother against greedily keeping the inheritance to himself? Or was Jesus saying something different to the *both* of them, and to *us* today?

Meanwhile, in Colossians, Paul tells a community of Jesus followers that since they are a new creation, they should set their minds on things above not things on earth. Put to death all of the earthly things within you so that you can be more like Christ in heaven.

It’s no wonder then that many Christians throughout history have interpreted these two scriptures to mean that we should only concern ourselves with spiritual things—that topics like money and politics have no place in the church. But the problem is—this is an interpretation that is only available to the wealthiest individuals. If you don’t know where your next meal is coming from, you have no choice but to think about worldly things. If you don’t know where you’re going to sleep tonight, you can’t help but count your earthly possessions. You can be like me and retreat into seminary for three years to study the scriptures and set your mind on God, but the student loan bill is always coming in the end. There is no such thing as a non-political gospel. In fact, if you look throughout history, you’ll find that the Christians who most believe in a depoliticized gospel, are the ones who have the greatest material interest in making sure the status quo doesn’t change.

But if we take a closer look at what Paul is saying, when he tells us to set our minds on Jesus, it will change the way we relate to others. It will have material consequences for our lives. In fact, I would argue that the only way to see Jesus is not by turning our thoughts upward to heaven but by turning to our neighbor and finding the living Christ in them. And if your neighbor is suffering, that means Jesus is suffering too.

Paul tells us powerfully that through our renewal in Jesus Christ, there “is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free; but Christ is all and *in* all!” This does not mean that our identities are wiped away and our differences are erased. But it does mean that we must change the way we relate to one another. Paul is *not* saying that it does not matter whether you are an enslaved person or an enslaver. Paul is saying that in the new creation, enslaved people are freed from being enslaved and enslavers are freed from being enslavers.

So when we return to Jesus’ parable, we can see that this rich man did not really die on the night before he retired. No, the day he truly died was when he found he had an overabundant harvest and instead of saying “this is good news for *us*,” he said, “this is good news for *me*.” Instead of building a longer table, he built a larger barn.

And sure, his lungs continued to draw breath and his heart continued to beat. But what kind of life is that really? One where you’re so disconnected from the humanity of your neighbors that you can only think of yourself. And that’s not a real life.

The truth is, even though the rich man had an abundance of crops and an abundance of land and an abundance of money, he did not know how to live *abundantly*. He was trapped in a mindset of *scarcity*.

If you view the world through the lens of scarcity, you will always be dissatisfied. Every dollar your neighbor has is a dollar that you don’t.

If you are a billionaire but you live with a scarcity mindset, you will never have enough money. This is what Paul meant when he said in today’s scripture that greed is really just another form of idolatry. But if you live abundantly, you may very well be poor but you know that there is far more to life than owning a lot of money.

I have a very close mentor in New York City who told me one time, “sometimes I choose not to tithe because I feel like I can’t afford to. When that happens, I spend the rest of my week feeling like I’m just struggling to get by. But when I *do* tithe, even in those weeks where I don’t feel I can afford to, I feel like I have enough.” Now

what changed between these two scenarios was not the money. It was his mindset *about* his money. That's what it means to live abundantly.

I want to tell you about a story I heard in the news two weeks ago. On the morning of July 22nd, a resident of Nashville, Tennessee and his 12 year old son walked out of their house and climbed inside the family van, parked in the driveway. All of a sudden they were swarmed by Immigrations and Customs Enforcement officers who had been watching their house for days, waiting for the moment to strike. Now this father had lived in Nashville for 14 years. But hatred and xenophobia are on the rise in this country, the likes of which harkens back to the rise of fascism in Nazi Germany, and which yesterday sparked two domestic terror attacks. It is in this environment that this family placed a target placed on their backs.

Fortunately, the father thought quickly and locked the car doors before the ICE officers could force them open. The officers harassed the father and son and used illegal tactics to try to drive them out of the van.

But that's when the neighbors began to peak out windows to see what the commotion was about. When they saw that this family was in danger, the whole community sprang into action. As the word spread, more and more people came and surrounded the van. They linked arms and formed a human chain, protecting this family from the ICE officers. Meanwhile others left and brought back food and wet rags so this father and son could stay cool in the blistering heat. Others ran to the gas station and brought back tanks of gas so that the van's air conditioner could continue to run.

After a four hour long standoff, the ICE officers backed down and left the scene. All of the neighbors cheered.

Here's the thing. Nashville, like many cities, has wages that are stagnating and costs of living that are increasing. Maybe some of these neighbors missed work that day and didn't get paid. Maybe some risked arrest, knowing that they wouldn't be able to afford bail. Maybe some ran and got food for this family even if they struggled to put food on their own table. For every single person who committed to protecting this family, there were a million good reasons not to jump in, but one very big reason to do so. Because they're human beings. And the fabric of our lives are woven into community such that what hurts you also hurts me, and what is good for you is also good for me.

I want to read for you a direct quote from Felishadae Young, one of the neighbors who stood up for the family. She said, "It's gonna happen again. They're gonna come

back and *we're* gonna to come back too. And *we're* gonna be even stronger and *we're* gonna learn how to protect one another. *We're* gonna be there for them and let them know that we are a community– that we are gonna stick together. That's what *we're* supposed to do. I don't care where you come from, *we're* supposed to stick together. God made all of us. It could be me. It could be my family. It could be anybody. It could be your neighbor. Just like it was my neighbor today.”

This is what it means to have abundance. *Real* abundance. You see a need that must be met and you work to meet it. And that's exactly what the man in Jesus' parable failed to do. He had every opportunity to use his good luck to serve those around him in need. And maybe it would not have saved his life but it would have saved his soul from the pain of being alienated from his own humanity. I think this was Jesus' real message to the brothers fighting over the inheritance. Instead of squabbling over the inheritance. They should look for ways that their wealth can be used to meet the needs of their neighbors.

So my question for you is this: What is the abundance in your life right now that God is calling on you to share? Maybe it *is* your money. But maybe your abundance is something else right now. It could be your time, your energy, your talents, your wisdom. It could be your prayers, some of you have an abundant prayer life. It could simply be the love that is in your heart that God is calling on you to share with your neighbor.

And what are the areas in your life that are limited by a scarcity mindset? What are the things you feel like you never have enough of? Rest? Family time? Love? One of the things about scarcity thinking is that– not only does it keep us from sharing what we have with others– but it prevents us from accepting the abundance that others want to share with us.

Today is Communion Sunday. Susan said in her sermon two weeks ago that this is not our table; this is Jesus' table. We are simply the guests at this feast. Well let me tell you, there is an abundance at Jesus' table– enough for every single person, and then some. When we gather around it, it is a sign of the abundance that is God's presence among us. And it is a reminder that no one needs to go away hungry.

The same is true of this planet. There is more than enough here to sustain every single person, while still being good stewards of the Earth. We could live in a world where everyone has a home, where every child is fed, where poverty ceases to exist. All we have to do is choose it. May it be so.