

Devil's Kitchen
Preached FCCW, August 4, 2019
Luke 12:13-21

Some time in the early 1800's, the peace and serenity of Sedona was disturbed by the sound of a thunderous crash and the sight of a great plume of orange-red dust billowing up into the air, as if spewed from the bowels of hell itself. Further investigation led to the discovery of a large sinkhole, which was aptly named Devil's Kitchen. Then, in 1989, a second unexpected collapse event occurred which widened the Devil's Kitchen sinkhole even further.

And, Devil's Kitchen still may not be done expanding. The geological conditions of heavy surface strata composed of manganese and iron resting atop a weaker layer of calcium and sandstone create an instability that promises more unpredictable collapses in the future. Yet, as I stood on the rim of Devil's Kitchen, surveying the boulders below that once were solid ground, there were no guardrails or warning signs to be seen.

Much of Jesus' ministry could be likened to going around posting warning signs about hazards to the safety of our souls. One of those warning signs has a name. It has been called "The Parable of the Rich Fool." There is only one character in this story. A man whose land produces in such abundance that he is confronted with an enviable problem. He doesn't have enough barns to hold all the crops he's harvested.

That explains what makes him **rich**. What makes him a **fool**, is the solution he arrives at to solve his problem. After a brief monologue with no one else but himself, the man decides to tear down the barns he presently has and build more barns that will be big enough to hold all his crops. In the ultimate picture of self-centeredness, he tells his own soul, "Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry."

I must confess that I am a tiny bit jealous of the solid ground he has, upon which to build a comfortable and worry-free retirement. But there are cracks in that footing, too. There is no consideration of how his newfound wealth might be a worthy legacy to leave behind for his family or community. Not a thought is given to how a portion of his plenty could be shared with the poor, the vulnerable and the aliens. Or of sharing his profits with the workers that planted and harvested the crops and would be the ones to tear down and rebuild the barns that he would use to hoard his abundance. Completely lacking is any hint of thanksgiving for God's generosity towards him, or of seeking God's will for how to invest this sudden prosperity in a way that would be a blessing to others or give glory to God.

This man lives isolated in a cocoon created by his own greed. But before he gets to enjoy any of this abundance, that bubble bursts when God tells him that that very night his life will be demanded of him. His life collapses beneath his feet, as suddenly and as unexpectedly as the earth collapsed to create Devil's Kitchen.

But the saddest part of this story is not that the man doesn't get to enjoy his wealth before he dies. The real tragedy is the opportunity he missed to use his excess of wealth to be a blessing to those who live their lives perpetually in the red. As a result, the good name he might have left behind is instead buried with him.

"So it is," says Jesus, "with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God." For Jesus the problem is not that the man possessed great material wealth, but that he was bankrupt when it came to his relationship to God and his concern for his neighbor. His vision for how to use his prosperity reached no farther than the boundaries of personal self-indulgence.

His untimely demise is not God's punishment for his greed. It is a reminder for us all that ultimately life does not consist in **what, but in who** we invest ourselves. You don't have to be independently wealthy to recognize the danger signs this parable places before us. Materialism inserts itself into the desperate lives of working-class families as easily as it does into the mansions of the rich. Jesus warned us to "Be on our guard against **all kinds of greed**," because greed can take many different forms. It's not one size fits all. And it can sometimes be difficult to recognize its presence in our own lives. It can also be tempting for us to justify its presence where we do recognize it.

But what we do know is this. When we leave love of God and care for our neighbors out of the equation of what we do with whatever abundance we have been given, it creates an unsustainable instability in our lives and relationships.

Jesus told this parable in response to two brothers who were divided over their inheritance. The solid rock of their family ties was collapsing under the pressures of "who gets what." Materialism is responsible for that same kind of instability over "who gets what" in our global family.

It's hard to feel grateful for God's extravagant generosity towards us when our definition of "enough" is always just a little bit more than what we've been given. It's easy for our ears to be closed to God's call for us to be our sisters' and brothers' keeper when all we are listening to is our own voice. And so, the gap between the richest and poorest keeps on widening, and the ground beneath our feet grows more and more shaky.

The warning signs are all around us. But so is the solution. Psalm 107 ends with the verse "Let those who are wise give heed to these things, and consider the steadfast love of the Lord." The "things" the Psalmist refers to are the ways that God's steadfast love is made known to us in the form of God's provision for our needs. Which is exactly what we do when we celebrate Communion. We give heed to God's steadfast love for us supremely demonstrated in Jesus' offering of his very life for our salvation. May our gratitude for that amazing gift be the solid, unshakable rock upon which our generosity to others is firmly founded.