

God's Provision (and Our Foolishness)
Parables Series: Stories About God's Generosity
Sermon on Luke 12:13-21 (6/13/15 & 6/14/15)
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Here at McCabe United Methodist Church, we have an interesting neighborhood issue related to our parking lot spaces...and how, at certain, very critical times each week, we seem to have far too few of them. Like, between the second and third worship services each Sunday morning.

I have heard about how other churches need to be very conscientious of when their Sunday morning worship services end so there is ample time to do something called “flip the parking lot.”

“Flipping the parking lot” is when one set of cars leaves so that another set of cars can again fill the lot. We have a hard time with this on many Sunday mornings, particularly from September through May when our second service ends around 11:00 and our third service begins at 11:15.

These two services tend to have our highest attendance – which, of course, means more people in more cars looking for parking lot spots in which to park. If we finish the second service right at 11:00, or a few minutes before, we *maybe* can get the parking lots flipped enough to accommodate those coming to the third service...

but, some weeks, for varying reasons, the second service runs long and parking spots don't start opening quickly enough. Unfortunately, on many, many occasions we've had people just drive away because they can't find a place to park when they arrive for worship.

(Right now this issue isn't as critical because, with our summer worship service times in full swing, our second service ends around 10:30 and our third service begins at 11:00...so there is more time for the parking lots to “flip.”)

Anyway, especially on Sunday mornings, the spots in our parking lots are at an absolute premium. We need them to be as available as possible for people coming to McCabe's various activities.

Unfortunately, when I arrive at the church on Sunday mornings – usually between 6:50 and 7:00am – there are sometimes already cars in our parking lots. And, when they are there at that time of the morning, I'm quite sure they've been there all night.

We have signs at the entrances to each of our lots saying they are reserved for McCabe Church activities!!! But that doesn't seem to stop people from using our parking lots as their own personal driveways.

This has been a neighborhood-related issue for years and, thankfully, it doesn't happen all that often. But, when it does, it drives me bonkers. And I always leave a note under the windshield wipers of any car parked in our lot before 7:00am Sunday morning.

The note goes something like this...give or take a few sentences: "Hi, there. If you see this at any time Sunday morning, please move your car to a place outside of our parking lot: we desperately need our parking lot spaces to remain available for people coming to our church activities on Sunday mornings.

"Because this is our private lot, we reserve the right to tow anyone who is in our parking lot that is not here for church activities. If I see this vehicle here again before 7:00am on a Sunday morning, I will call a tow company to have it removed from our lot. We really do want to be a good neighbor and so we hope you will respect our need to keep our parking lot spots available for folks coming to church on Sunday mornings.

"That said, since you are already parked in one of our spots, I hope you will join us for one of our worship services! We have three on Sunday mornings: one at 8, one at 9:30, and one at 11:00. - *Pastor Jenny at McCabe Church*"

The first time I put a note like this on a car in our lot, I felt *terrible* for doing it. Churches are supposed to be nice and hospitable for everyone, aren't they?

The next time I put a note like this on a car in our lot, I felt a little less bad. Then, I had to put a note on the *same car* two weeks in a row! At that point, righteous indignation just overtook me and I very nearly called a towing company. But my sympathetic heart got the best of me and I instead left a note of the "one more strike and you're out" variety.

That car has never been back in our parking lot, by the way...but I know it belongs to people who live in our neighborhood. And I truly do want McCabe to be a good neighbor to those who live around us. I also want us to give our neighbors the benefit of the doubt. I don't want to assume our neighbors are all inconsiderate, disrespectful people who don't care about our parking lot rules.

So I was very grateful for something that happened late this past week. I may not have all the details of this story accurate...but what I do know will be close enough to make the point I hope to convey.

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I came in to work late Thursday morning. My family had been here in the days prior and I stayed home to see them off around 11:00am Thursday; I headed to the church after they drove away.

A couple of hours later, I left the building for a moment and noticed one of our church members doing something to one of our parking lot signs – you know, the

signs that say you're only supposed to use our parking lot if you're here for church activities. I also noticed a young man I didn't recognize working alongside our church member.

I crossed the parking lot to say "hello." As it turns out, the two men were working to fix the parking lot sign. See, either the night before or early that morning, someone knocked the sign down with their car and, in the process, hit a car that was parked on the street near that sign, knocking off *their* driver's side mirror.

Our Thursday morning men's Bible study group was alerted to the problem because the car that got hit happened to belong to another of our McCabe church guys who lives across the street...and one of the guys in the study was the church member I saw working on the sign Thursday afternoon. (Got that?)

Now, I was *not* surprised to see this particular McCabe church member working to fix the sign. He is one of many, *many* wonderful McCabe people who are willing to pitch in to help in all sorts of ways. What *did* surprise me was seeing the *other* guy – the young guy I didn't recognize – working with him.

Because of the whole "cars in our parking lot when they shouldn't be" issue, I had begun to get a bad taste in my mouth about some of our neighbors...even though I must admit I've met very few of them. So I was surprised to see one of our neighbors working alongside one of our members – on a hot day, no less – to fix a problem he had done nothing to create.

(And, frankly, even if he *had* knocked the sign down, at least he was helping to fix it, rather than simply leaving it there for someone else to take care of!)

I was so grateful. Like...far more grateful than I probably should have been – because much of my gratitude stemmed from low expectations of our neighbors. And I thought, "Huh. Looks like it's time for me to start giving our neighbors the benefit of the doubt." After all, if I want them to respect *us*, I better respect *them*.

Besides that, it was great to be able to meet one of our neighbors! Every time I've seen someone's car parked in our lot early on a Sunday morning, I've wished I could talk to them in person to make a more positive impression than a note on their windshield that threatens to have their car towed.

See, the fact is, while we *do own* the land on which our parking lots reside, it's not ultimately *our* land. Not really, anyway. Because all land belongs first and foremost to God who created it. As I was thinking about today's reading from Luke chapter 12, I couldn't help but think about all this...because today's reading has a lot to do with the idea of "deserving" – who really owns what and what you do with what you have.

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Except for a couple of weekends when I will not be preaching, during June and July here at McCabe, we'll be exploring a bunch of Jesus' parables. As I said last week, I'll be using these parables as springboards to jump into a year of sermons that will somehow focus on the many aspects of Christian generosity.

And, as I also said last week, the parables of Jesus are a great place to start...because, when you look at them carefully, you see they are all about generosity.

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The parables of Jesus are nuggets of stories that often seem a little strange, but that are meant to illustrate some major truth – or a handful of major truths – about God and about faithful life in this world. The parables might strike you at first as having one meaning... but will then hit you with new and deeper insight later, after the story has settled-into your mind and heart for a while.

And that's the power of a good story, right? It's not only interesting to listen to or to read, but it also manages to change you. Jesus' parables are just those kinds of stories because they are meant to change how we think and feel about God and about what it means to be faithful in this world.

So, let's turn more specifically to today's reading from Luke chapter 12. Hear it again – perhaps with ears that are open just a bit more to God's particular word for us:

A man in a crowd said to Jesus, "Teacher, tell my brother to give me my share of what our father left us when he died." Jesus answered, "Who gave me the right to settle arguments between you and your brother?" Then [Jesus] said to the crowds, "Don't be greedy! Owning a lot of things won't make your life safe."

So Jesus told them this story: A rich man's [land] produced a big crop, and he said to himself, "What can I do? I don't have a place large enough to store everything." Later he said, "Now I know what I'll do. I'll tear down my barns and build bigger ones, where I can store all my grain and other goods. Then I'll say to myself, 'You have stored up enough good things to last for years to come. Live it up! Eat, drink, and enjoy yourself.'"

But God said to him, "You fool! Tonight you will die. Then who will get what you have stored up?" This is what happens to people who store up everything for themselves, but are poor in the sight of God."¹

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Years ago, when I was serving as pastor at another church in the Dakotas, our worship and finance committees were meeting to plan the theme for our fall stewardship campaign...

1 Luke 12:13-21 (Contemporary English Version)

you know, everyone's favorite time of year when the sermons seem to all be about money, and then, at the end of the campaign, members and constituents are asked to fill out the dreaded "pledge card," making known their financial commitment to the church's various funds for the upcoming budget year.

(There's always more to it than that, of course...and stewardship campaigns are not typically designed to be just about money, but, you get the gist.)

In this meeting between the worship and finance committees at this other church, through a fun brainstorming process, we started zeroing in on a series theme that revolved around the idea of *inheritance* – that we, as children of God, receive a bountiful inheritance of grace, forgiveness, and salvation from God and, as such, we should live in gratitude.

Most of us in the meeting were getting very excited about the theme, but one of the women present was holding back. When she finally spoke up to offer her perspective, she talked about how she really struggled with *inheritance* being a positive thing. She's a banker and her experience with "inheritance" is family members fighting over who gets what and who deserves certain things more than others do.

It's true. *Inheritance* is often shaky ground, full of old wounds that get re-opened. Inheritance can also open wounds that were never there before. It's messy, heart-breaking, and fraught with people focusing on what they "deserve," rather than focusing on simple gratitude.

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So, two things happen in this reading from Luke chapter 12: first, a man in a crowd demands that Jesus tell his brother to give him his share of what their father left them as inheritance when he died...and, second, Jesus tells a parable about a man whose land produced a huge crop and, in order to keep all the crop

for himself, he decided to tear down his existing barns and build newer, bigger ones.

It would be easy to suggest that the main point of this passage of Scripture is “Don't be greedy!” Jesus even flat-out says “don't be greedy” to the guy who asks about his inheritance...and the message of the parable seems to have a clear anti-greed theme to it.

While I would certainly agree that we who follow Jesus should avoid greed at all costs, I think this passage goes deeper – all the way to the very heart and root of human greed. And I believe the heart and root of human greed is *lack of gratitude*.

Because, whereas greed is about thinking we *deserve* more and more – so we *want* more and more – gratitude is the spiritual opposite.

When we are grateful, we recognize everything comes to us as gift – not because we *deserve* it, not because we *need* it...but because the one who gives it loves us and wants to bless us.

Now, let me say that again: The heart and root of human greed is *lack of gratitude*. Because, whereas greed is about thinking we *deserve* more and more – so we *want* more and more – gratitude is the spiritual opposite.

When we are grateful, we recognize everything comes to us as gift – not because we *deserve* it, not because we *need* it...but because the one who gives it loves us and wants to bless us. It's the difference between feeling entitled to something and understanding you're *worth* the blessing...simply because you're loved by the giver.

Feeling like we deserve certain things or are entitled to them, is like grabbing for something and holding onto it with a tight fist. But understanding we are *worthy* of blessings and then expressing gratitude for them is like open hands – ready to receive and to give.

The gentlemen in today's reading from Luke 12 want to grab...they want to clutch what they think they deserve with tight fists. They don't recognize that everything is already a gift given to them by something bigger than themselves.

The man who wants his share of the inheritance has no respect for the fact that the inheritance is, first and foremost, a gift from his father...a gift he likely did very little to *deserve*, but that comes to him simply because his father loved him.

And the man in the parable seems to think he is fully responsible for his good crop – and that, because he is fully responsible for it, he should get to keep it all for himself.

But notice the way Jesus begins the parable: “A rich man's land produced a big crop.” *A rich man's land produced a big crop.*

Not the man himself. Not his servants. His *land* produced the crop. And just who exactly is responsible for that land? Who created it? Who made it land that produces good crop? Who, ultimately, *owns* that land? Not the man in the story – that's for sure! He may have bought it...or inherited it...but that land was there long before he showed-up.

Kind of like our parkings lots, right? I mean, thank God we have this great plot of land in this wonderful community, and this beautiful building in which to worship the God who created us and who loves us so much that we are given gift upon gift...day after day.

Our God is so generous in providing for us. And we are fools if we don't respond to God's generosity with a deep sense of gratitude. Amen.