

**FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
305 EAST MAIN STREET
DURHAM, NC 27701
PHONE: (919) 682-5511**



“Build Bigger Barns”

A sermon by Mindy L. Douglas

18th Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year C)

July 31, 2016

Colossians 3:1-11; Luke 12:13-21

“Is your house a teardown candidate?” An article from a few years ago on CNN’s MONEY website began with this question. “Thousands on a kitchen remodel?” the article continues, “A new deck? Just tear the whole thing down.” Americans simply want more space and bigger rooms than they currently have, the article asserts, and it goes on to instruct homeowners to consider the tear-down option before they add on a costly addition. The article closes with this advice: “If you think these [teardown] conditions exist in your town, it may pay to consider your home’s teardown potential.”¹

Around Durham, we hear a lot of talk about gentrification these days. Gentrification, as you may know, describes the way an urban neighborhood changes as outsiders move in and renovate homes and businesses, which increases property values and rental costs and often displaces those who have lived in the neighborhood for years. Gentrification involves renovations and improvements mostly, but may also include teardowns. Several areas in Durham have seen individuals or developers come in and tear down existing buildings (sometimes historical ones) in order to build something bigger, something that will hold more people and stuff, something that will make more money.

Apparently, the neighborhood where the star of today’s parable lives has great teardown potential. And it’s a good thing because this rich man has had abundantly

¹ Article by Les Christie, CNNMoney.com staff writer, November 16, 2006.

rich land which has produced bumper crops, more than his current barns could manage. “What should I do?” he wondered. “Hmm. Give the extra food to the homeless shelter? No. Donate it to the Food Bank? Nah. Give it the church? Nah.” The rich man comes up with a much better idea. He realizes the teardown potential of his barns and has an “ah-ha” moment. “I’ll do this!” he cries. “I’ll tear down my barns and build bigger ones!” So the construction crews roll in—first the bulldozers and graders, then the trucks laden with lumber, builders and roofers and before long, the rich man gazes at his new barns—things of beauty—and sighs deeply. “Ahhhhh. Now this is good. Now this is very good. I have enough for years to come. I will relax, eat, drink, and be merry. This is very, very good.”

And that night he dies. Rich in earthly possessions beyond measure. But poor toward God. Poor toward God.

Now if we go back to the beginning of this passage, we can remind ourselves of why Jesus told this story in the first place. It seems that a family squabble was taking place. Two brothers had been left alone with their father’s inheritance. But apparently things aren’t being divided up fairly, for one brother comes to Jesus and hopes he will help him remedy an unjust situation. “Teacher,” he says, “tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me!” This plea for justice reminds us of Martha’s plea to Jesus about her sister, “Tell her to help me!” she demanded. She’s not the only one trying to use Jesus as an arbitrator. The brother in this passage needs his help, but he doesn’t get it. Instead, like Martha, he finds himself rebuked. “Take care!” Jesus says, “Be on your guard against all kinds of greed, for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.” And to illustrate, he tells the parable.

Most of you here today have been around long enough to know about family disputes over possessions, especially the ones that happen after the last parent has died and left a large house full of stuff (often times very nice stuff, even antiques) to be divided between two, three, or more children. Suddenly, mild-mannered, quiet and kind adults become singularly concerned about getting “the share they deserve.” Tempers flare, angry words are uttered, and arbitrators are called in, all to ensure that each person is getting their “fair share.” Is it greed? Most in the heat of the moment would deny that it is, after all, there is a sufficient amount of

sentimentality wrapped up in such a scenario. But Jesus doesn't hesitate to call it greed. He warns of the many forms greed takes, and reminds the brother (and us readers also) that life isn't about an abundance of possessions.

Once again, Jesus speaks words that go against the message of society. Contrast for instance Jesus' claim that life isn't about an abundance of possessions with the worldly message of consumerism and acquisition in today's United States. The message the world gives to us is that life *is* about an abundance of possessions, and most of us are sadly lagging behind, the world tells us. Daily, we are bombarded with the messages of the world: "You need this." "You can't possibly survive without that." "You deserve this. Treat yourself." They come to us through commercials, through ads in magazines and newspapers, through the examples shown to us in television shows and blockbuster movies. I read recently where we receive about 20 hours a week of media input, bombarding us with the message of the benefits of accumulation, as opposed to about 15-30 minutes a week of scripture reflection (through worship or personal study) reminding us to focus on God. This is a huge difference. It's no wonder we are sucked in by these messages. It's no wonder we begin to believe that we really *need* things that society has survived without for hundreds of thousands of years.

James Bacon, in his article, "The Excesses of Affluence," writes of the incredible excesses of current society. As a part of his research, he investigated stores in his hometown to raise his own awareness of the ridiculousness of American consumption in our day and age. He visits store after store and finds unnecessary product after product marketed to a world ready to buy, ready to get the latest gadget. He tells of an item he discovered in a store that sells "some of the most intriguing but utterly useless and landfillable stuff I encountered. My favorite [he writes]: The Motorless BBQ Grill Brush. 'With powerful rotating bristles,' the sale literally touts, 'this motorized BBQ grill brush quickly removes cooked-on food grill residue.' Why buy a \$1.50 grill scrubber . . . when you can pay \$25 for a brush that works only as long as the batteries last?"²

² "The Excesses of Affluence" is found at www.baconrebellion.com.

But we fall for it. Time and again. I am as guilty as the next person. And we fill the space we own and we have to come up with a solution to handle all that we have accumulated. For many Americans, the answer is clear: buy a bigger house with a bigger kitchen to hold all the necessary gadgets, with bigger closets and bigger bathrooms, bigger garages, etc. Or, if the teardown potential is good, rip that baby down and start again. But how long before the bigger home is full? How long before we are looking for more space again? You see, we have an amazing capacity to fill the space we occupy. We have an amazing ability to long for more. Is it greed? Surely not!

Pastor Martha Sterne serves St. Andrew's Episcopal Church in Maryville, Tennessee, and knows exactly the seduction the world offers us.

Every time I go through the checkout line at the grocery store [she writes] I succumb to the siren song of the magazine rack and buy another five-dollar slick-looking publication to join the magazines already stockpiled. At night, when I can't sleep, I flip through the magazines and wallow in the pictures of happy homeowners cooking like mad (but elegantly) in the perfect kitchen or musing in the perfect study or enjoying wholesome activities in the perfect living room or graciously entertaining casts of thousands all over the blooming perfect place.

In the magazines, they have perfect closets. I flip through pages in the closet sections and my heart sings. Ah, to be the queen of closets the size of small countries! To be the mistress of ample storage with order and room for everything, like stuff I need but just not right this minute or maybe not this decade. Take mason jars, for instance. I have always wanted to be the kind of person who puts up preserves and pickles and jellies. Maybe buying mason jars and storing them will get me going.

I pore over the magazines in the small hours of the night [she writes] and think, "I will do this. I will build this house with all these closets and store all my goods. And then I will say to my soul, 'Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.'" And then I put down my

magazines and drift off to sleep. I have enough for today, and maybe once I have my closets worked out, I'll stop worrying about tomorrow.³

Jesus, as we know, is no dummy. He knows that much of our motivation to accumulate comes from our worry, fear or anxiety. And so he follows up the parable of the rich fool by exhorting his disciples in a sermon similar to Matthew's sermon on the Mount: "Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat, or about your body, what you will wear. For life is more than food and the body more than clothing. Consider the ravens . . . consider the lilies . . . And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? If then you are not able to do so small a thing as that, why do you worry about the rest? It is the nations of the world that strive for these things and your Father knows that you need them. Instead strive for his kingdom, and these things will be given to you as well" (Luke 12:22-31, selected verses).

It's all about where our heart is, isn't it? It's all about what we love, what we trust, what we put our faith in. Is it possessions? Is it accumulation? Is it about more and more and more? Or is it about God? Do we find our security in that which we have stored away, or are we, to use Jesus' phrase, "rich toward God?"

I don't know about you, but one of the reasons I have always come to church every Sunday (even before it was my job to do so!) is to be a part of a community that seeks together to counteract the messages of the world that go against the gospel of Jesus Christ. Messages that say accumulation is good. Messages that provoke our fear and scare us into consumption. Messages that tell us we don't have enough, that more is better, that bigger is better. Messages that tell us to put our faith in this, or that, or the other thing, but not in God. One of the reasons I have always come to church is to hear the message of grace, the message of peace, the message of hope that comes to us in Jesus Christ and that counteracts the messages of the world.

Friends, on this day we gather together for just such a reminder. That we can only be truly rich when we rest in the hands of God's grace, when we surrender

³ "Building Bigger Closets," sermon by Martha P. Sterne, found at www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=637.

ourselves to a love that is beyond anything we have ever known. We can only be rich when we carve out time in our day to make space for God—through study, prayer, meditation and service. We can only be rich when we expend our greatest energy not in accumulation but in love of our neighbor. We cannot buy this love; we cannot store it away in bigger barns or in bigger closets. We need not tear down our buildings to make room for more accumulation. What we must do, though, is tear down the walls around our hearts to make room for God’s abundant love. May our prayer together today be that our hearts will always be open and that our spirits will always make room for this abundant grace.

In the name of the Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. Amen.