

“Life on the Farm”
Luke 12:13-21
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Cottage Grove United Church of Christ
Cottage Grove, Minnesota
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Eighteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

My grandmother was raised on a farm near Enderlin, North Dakota, and my father and I both spent summers playing there. “The Farm,” as I have known it since childhood, actually consists of *two* farms, a short distance from each other.

One farm has a newer metal shed and an old, but well-kept farm house where my cousins live. A short walk down the road, one will find the *second* farm: a traditional red barn, a few outbuildings, and an old, dilapidated farm house. The barn still has some cows in it, as my cousins rent it out to local farmers. But the house, which was last inhabited by my great-uncle, has lain empty for 25 years.

This house, where my grandmother was born and spent her childhood, where both my father and I played as children, is now crumbling. The house has been stripped of its many treasures, as relatives have “rescued” pieces of furniture and mementos over the years. The door is now nailed shut, but when people open it and tiptoe across the crumbling floors -- as both my father and I have done in recent years -- we find little but dust, an old Christmas stocking, and some furniture no one has yet thought to remove. It is little but a shell of memories, and one can all but hear the laughter and tears reverberating from the walls. No *earthly wealth*, though.

The man in this morning’s parable faces a similar dilemma, and as I recall walking across that whispering prairie, I think of him. This ancient Palestinian farmer knew the abundance of successful farming. Like the once lucrative, now struggling, family farms that dotted our nation, he knew the wealth of harvesting a good crop, to the point that he hardly knew what to do with the surplus. But like the big-business agricultural conglomerates that have put so many smalltime farmers out of business today, he thought of his *own* needs. “I’ll just keep it all to myself. Won’t need to worry about a *thing* from now on!”

The man’s response is understandable. We *all* want to have a little something “set aside for a rainy day.” The old silo on my ancestors’ farm is testament to that, and city dwellers have found other ways to prepare for

the future. Any of you living off retirement plans, or saving for them? Any of you have a life insurance policy, or health insurance? These are all ways in which we “store our grain and our goods,” so we can say to ourselves “Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years.” ...Yes! Jesus is talking to *us!*

There are *other* ways in which we “build bigger barns” too -- even those of us who do not consider ourselves materially wealthy. My ancestors -- successful farmers at the time, but never wealthy -- filled their home with the comforts rural North Dakota life could afford. A piano, decent furniture, a kitchen stocked with bake ware, souvenir glasses from rare vacations, beautiful woodwork, and a few leaded glass windows that still allow light through their dirt-encrusted panes.

But those “necessities of life” are all forgotten now. A cake pan still sits perilously on a kitchen counter, as the floor under it prepares to return to the earth. A Christmas card lays carelessly on a chair, as though my uncle, dead now eighteen years, had just picked it up to read it for the first time.

There are lessons to be learned from that 100 year old farmstead that Earth is now preparing to reclaim. *All is impermanence*. Only *life* matters. That house, in which several children, and so many memories were born, means *nothing* without the people who brought life to it. Now life will continue around it. The prairie grasses have begun to grow up around the house. Perhaps some day a tree will grow where the living room now stands.

So, too, the rich landowner would gain nothing by hoarding his crops and partying for the rest of his days. The *crops themselves* mean nothing. The barns in which they are stored mean nothing. It is only the *life they bring*, the sustenance they provide, that has meaning. Jesus says, “For life is more than food, and the body more than clothing.” The material things are meaningless, except for those who do not have enough of them to survive. And to those, *we who have enough must give*.

The man who wanted bigger barns held life in his hands. “What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?” he asked. Rather than save the surplus for himself, he could well have answered, “I should give what I do not absolutely need to those who need it more than I. I have plenty of food on my table, and clothes on my back. I have what I need to sustain me. But others do not. Therefore, I will give of my bounty, so that others can sustain life.”

Most of us do not consider ourselves “rich landowners.” We live on fairly modest incomes and do not always have enough money to do

everything we want to do. We might think it's *foolish* and wasteful to tear down an existing structure, for the sole purpose of building a bigger one, and we might think of the man in this morning's gospel as one of "those annoying rich folks." But *think about it for a minute*.

I have spoken with several of you who have been trying to clean out houses in which you have lived for years. "Where did all this *stuff* come from?", you wonder. "Oh, here are the baby clothes I saved all these years for my grandchildren. Here are the toys my children used to play with. Here are the books I never read, or the clothes I wore but once."

Neither the rich man hoarding his crops, nor my ancestors creating their home on the prairie, knew materialism in the way that even middle class Americans know it today. Neither of them knew *worry* in the same way we know it today -- constant fears about the future of Social Security, about being able to afford the many medicines we take, about being able to find a nursing home if the time comes. We live in a world in which *fear* is a constant companion, and nothing seems certain. So we try to compensate with saving what we can.

Live now, Jesus tells us! *Let go of your worries!* A little preparation for the future is prudent, but don't spend *all* your energies hoarding your goods in times of blessing. The rich man thought he could bless his life with earthly treasures, with bigger barns and overflowing coffers of grain. But Jesus reminds us that those blessings come only from God. Grain will rot in the barn, and *then* what good will it do you, or anyone else? Live life while you have it; share life while you can.

I weep every time I go in the old farm house now; I admit my attachment to it, and my sadness at its demise. But the glory of God, once worshipped by the people who inhabited the house, has begun to spring up around it. As I stand still and listen to the wind whisper through the grass and smell the wildflowers, I cannot but think of Jesus' words: "Consider the lilies, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin; yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these."

The old farm house will crumble and die. It is impermanent. But the prairie around it will live on, and it is *this* life that is true blessing from God, that is true permanence. It is impossible to bless ourselves with earthly riches, for true blessing comes only from the God who brings us life.

Let us give of what we have, so that it may bring life to others. *And let us pray.*