

## The Barn Raising

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on August 2, 1992, the 9th Sunday after Pentecost. Scripture Lessons: Luke 12:13-21.

**IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.**

When you think of a fool, what images come to mind? I think of someone who ignores "Beware of Dog" signs. When I was a young pastor in Reedsville, PA I was visiting members of the church who were farmers. I noticed the "Beware of Dog" sign when I drove down the farm lane but chose to ignore it. I stopped the car. No sign of dog. I opened the door, while sitting safely in the car. No dog. I got out of car and stood beside the open door scanning the landscape. No dog. I walked cautiously up the path to the door. I noticed nervously that I was closer to the house than to my car and I'd be in trouble if there really was a dog to beware of. I got to the door. Still no sign of dogs. I breathe a sigh of relief. I knocked at the door. Dogs! Giant dogs! Vicious dogs! Two St. Bernard's loping full speed at me from the blind side of the house. Foaming mouths! Barks like the rumbling of summer thunder. The door to the house is locked. I panic. I run unceremoniously to my car. I suddenly remember that Mowgli, in Kipling's, Jungle Book, would stare into the eyes of wild beasts and hold them at bay. With my back to the car, fumbling behind my back to open the car door, I stare down the mad dogs. It works! Only Mowgli didn't have to stare down two wild animals at a time. I got the door open and jumped in, not a moment too soon. Sitting there trembling, I said to myself, "Fool!"

Jesus once told a story about a rich fool. There's no hint that he got his wealth illegally or immorally. He was smart, hard working. In many ways he was

the epitome of the American success story. He was a wealthy businessman, a farmer. He'd worked hard out in the fields and God had blessed him with bumper crops. What should he do? He did what any prudent person would do. He did what the Old Testament patriarch, Joseph, did when God showed him that a famine was coming. He built larger barns to store the grain so that it wouldn't be wasted. But God said to him, "You fool." Why was he a fool?

1. He was a fool, for one reason, because he saw no further than himself and his own needs. He'd have fit in well with the "me generation" and the yuppies of the eighties. Few portions of scripture are more self centered. "... he thought to *himself*, what shall / do for / have no place to store *my* crops?... / will do this: / will pull down *my* barns and build larger ones, and there / will store all *my* grain and *my* goods. And / will say to *my* soul, 'Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years....'"

"I... I... I... my... my... my!" In all of this there's no sign that he was aware of less fortunate men and women. God had blessed his hard work with bumper crops but he thought only of himself. Instead of looking beyond himself to see how his wealth could help to create jobs, or feed hungry children, or raise the wages of his workers he thought only of himself.

I think of how different my good friend, Jim Haughwout, was. He was a farmer in Belleville, PA. He died tragically in a farm accident about ten years ago. He and his wife would invite me to dinner every Sunday after church before I was married. He had six children, three girls and three boys (He always sat me

between his two oldest daughters). He'd sit there in the big farm kitchen at the head of the table, before the noon meal, open the Bible, read a passage of Scripture, fold his huge, rough hands in prayer and offer thanks for the food and all his blessings.

He lived in his ancestral home that had been in his family for two hundred years. He owned a large dairy farm and also raised and sold horses. He was generous with all that God had given him. When the annual Mifflin County World Hunger project came along he was the first to contribute a beef cow and he'd go and help butcher and can the meat. And when it came to the church, he believed in tithing. I remember coming back from horse back riding with him one Sunday afternoon after dinner about 20 years ago. He said to me, "Ted, the Lord has really blessed me this year. I got a good price on milk this year. The cows have produced well. All the calves are healthy. I've made as much money selling horses this year as selling milk. And then he got this great big grin and said, "I'm just going to have to give away more this year." Jim was no fool. He'd learned that the secret of life and the secret of success can be measured, not by how much we make, but by how much we give.

2. The Rich Fool was a fool, secondly, because he never saw God. Here's someone who talks to himself, but nowhere is there even a hint that he talks to God or is even aware that there is a God. The Psalmist once wrote, "The fool hath said in his heart, 'There is no God'." Modern translators say that we should read, "The fool has said in his heart, God doesn't matter." God didn't seem to matter to

the man who torn down his barns and built bigger ones.

There's no recognition that *God* had blessed his hard work with success. Let me ask you this: Do you attribute your success in life *only* to your hard work and clear thinking? Of course, hard workers are often more likely to be blessed with wealth and success than those who do nothing. But our wealth and success are more dependent on God's blessing than our efforts. I think of the millions of men and women who work from morning to night in many parts of the world, and even in our own nation, who aren't blessed with wealth.

George Washington Carver was once asked, "What's the secret of your success?" He answered, "It's simple. It's found in the Bible, 'In all thy ways acknowledge him, and he shall direct thy paths.'" There's not one sign that the rich barn-raiser ever acknowledged God. He was a fool.

3. There's a third reason God called the barn-raiser a fool. Not only did he not see beyond himself to his neighbor or to God, he couldn't see beyond this present life. His vision was entirely limited and bound by this world, by what he could see and touch and eat. "I will say to my soul, 'Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.'" He was a fool because he was acting as though he had many years to live when in fact he had only hours.

We don't know how long we have to live. I become aware of that more and more each day of my life. Kay's sister is only 35 years old. She's terribly sick and may not live through this year apart from a miracle. Death can come suddenly and unexpectedly to young or old. It's not morbid to take death into consideration and

to plan for it's inevitability.

At the very least a wise person makes a will a keeps it updated according to changing circumstances. A wise person does well to consider a living will long before it's needed. A wise person gives some thought to funeral arrangements long before they may be needed. I think of Kay's grandmother Vogt. When she knew she was dieing of cancer she calmly called the funeral director and made all her funeral arrangements. She planned her funeral, picked out Scripture passages, chose hymns, and spoke to her pastor about her death.

But more than funeral plans, Kay's grandmother was prepared to meet her maker. She was a down to earth, no nonsense, committed disciple of Jesus Christ and she had been ready for her death for years in terms of her relationship to Christ.

I'm amazed at the apparent way that otherwise very smart, intelligent, sophisticated men and women seem to ignore their relationship to God in the face of their inevitable death. We'll spend time planning for our retirement; checking out IRAs, investing in stocks and bonds and mutual funds, planning retirement trips to various places in the world, but taking no thought for the world to come.

Some people seem to see nothing beyond this world. When the fool is mentioned in Scripture, he's the one who says to himself down in his heart, "There really is no divine accountability. All this business about God's high standard, God's holy character, God's desire for me to glorify him... well, I'm not so sure. In fact, I sincerely doubt that there is a God anything like that. I'm really free to

live as my own god (Swindoll). This certainly appears to be one reason God called the man in our Gospel lesson a fool. He never saw beyond this world. All his plans were made on the basis of life here and now.

Here, then, are three reasons God called this man a fool. He didn't see beyond himself, to his neighbor. He didn't see beyond himself, to God. He didn't see beyond this world.

How do we apply all this to ourselves? I'm aware that our nation is in a major recession. Some of us are financially strapped. Some of us are unemployed. Business men and women wonder how much longer than can hold out. Others are concerned about how to pay increased property taxes. And, then, there are always those unexpected items that drain our savings: the water heater that needs to be fixed, the muffler that needs to be replaced, the roof that needs to be repaired. Not many of us are tearing down our homes and building bigger ones today. In the face of all this, God calls those of us who are more blessed to look beyond ourselves to those who are hurting. God calls us to look beyond ourselves and to acknowledge God to be the source of all our blessings and success. God calls us to realize that we must one day give account for how we have used what God has given us to make life better for our neighbor.

"Beware of Greed!", Jesus warns us. The Greek word for "greed" is very descriptive. Literally, it means the thirst for having more, always having more and more and still more. But Jesus tells us that "One's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions." As I hear this word of God I ask myself these

questions: Am I, perhaps, a greedy individual like the Rich Fool? How would I know if I'm greedy? How far do I see beyond myself and my needs? Do I acknowledge the Lord to be the source of all my blessings? Do I experience joy in giving? Do I have an inordinate desire for material possessions? Am I doing what I can and should for the hungry? I'm not sure how honestly I can answer any of those questions but the word of God requires that I raise them.

And so I come back to the beginning of my sermon. When I drove down that farm lane I chose to ignore that "Beware of Dog!" and was nearly eaten alive by two Saint Bernards. I was a fool. I ignored the written word. Today the Lord Jesus Christ has pointed to a sign that says, "Beware of Greed!" The Lord Jesus Christ, in the written and preached Word, has shown us a picture of a foolish man who chose to ignore that word.

Don't be a fool!

Don't ignore God's Word!

God's word is meant to warn us and spare us grief and point us to life and joy.

Let us pray: Help us and all people, dear Lord, to understand the purpose and place of possessions in our life. Keep before us the peril of loving them. Help us to make them our servants, and never our masters. And let neither lack of possessions, nor abundance of possessions, in any degree loosen our grasp upon reality, which is ours through the love of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.