



Mount Carmel Lutheran Church

Functional Atheism and our Collapsing World

by Rev. John Strommen on Luke 12:13-21

Sunday, August 4, 2019

Why is the farmer declared a fool? He did well as a farmer and now at retirement age has done well enough to build bigger barns to house all his crops. Now he can relax and enjoy the fruits of his labor. Isn't this the way it's supposed to be done?

Why does Jesus refer to this man as a fool?

The rich farmer is a fool not because he is wealthy or because he saves for the future, but because he appears to live only for himself. He is like Narcissus, staring at his image in the water. His conversation is *only* with himself. His focus on the future is all about what he will do. *I will do this, and I will do that. My crops, my grain, my goods, etc.* There is no thought to using the abundance to help others, no expression of gratitude for his good fortune, no recognition of God at all, except for the Unholy Trinity of "me, myself, and I."

Now, we don't know the status of the farmer's belief system, and yet, it doesn't matter. God does not show up in his conversation with himself. The farmer is guilty of *functional atheism* – perhaps believing in God (as virtually everyone did in Jesus' time) but living as though there were *no God*. To *live* as someone who believes in God means that we have imaginations that continually point us outside of ourselves to God and neighbor. Neither shows up here.

The sad part is there is a growing number of people today who believe in God, but live as though they were an atheist, as though there were no God. By the way, this includes people in the church. More and more of us are functional atheists as we fail to find room in our imaginations, in our language, for the presence and movement of God in our lives. This is a major part of the crisis churches are facing today.

Functional atheism leads to, and is most likely caused by, a second mistake by the rich farmer. He is not foolish because he makes provision *for* the future; he is foolish because he believes that by his wealth he can *secure* his future: "Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry." He has tried to insulate himself from fate and fortune through productive farming and adequate finances, and he has come up empty. No sooner has he envisioned his future than God speaks to declare what

the future actually holds for him. That night his life will be demanded of him. So much for his hard earned plans for security.

You see the same delusion today in pro sports where a player is negotiating a contract and weighing competing offers. We're talking about the difference between, say, \$50 million and \$70 million. And what the player, or an apologist for that player, might say to disappointed hometown fans when he bolts for the \$70 million, goes something like this: "Well, so and so had to think about the security of his family." Or, as NBA player Latrell Sprewell famously said in spurning a lucrative Timberwolves offer in favor of a better one: "I have to think about putting food on the table for my family." Really?!

Now, no one should begrudge a high-priced entertainer or athlete the chance to become wealthy in the marketplace. What is both laughable and sad all once is the idea that multi-million-dollar contracts are about providing security or putting food on the table. I think we're a little beyond security at that point.

And yet these folks sound a bit like the rich farmer in this respect: they are both preoccupied by security. They seem to think that their key to their future is what they can secure on the open market. Often times, they never feel they have enough, so they continue to amass more. But how much is enough? Thinking that financial or material success will give you freedom and allow you a carefree attitude is a sad illusion. As Luther taught us, our attempts at self-justification, making our lives meaningful, are doomed to fail. Many studies of affluent neighborhoods - where people are supposedly living the American dream - reveal a disproportionate level of the diseases of an unhealthy human community: extensive drug abuse, high divorce rate, high suicide rate, loneliness and depression.

What happens to any of us when we think we had secured our future, when we had acquired all the things needed for happiness, but we still didn't feel secure "in here?" But, you see, things like security and happiness are not things we can control, for, in truth, we are not in control of much at all. Just ask the farmer. Or consider this.

Here is a picture of my brother David, taken in 1985 in front of the Twin Towers. One year later my kid brother was struck by lightning and died. 16 years later...well, you know what happened.

How much control does any of us really have? Then again, what do we expect? We are only creatures, while God is our creator. And our creator promises to handle the security question for us. Only the unconditional promises of God can give us the assurance that nothing in all of creation can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus. So, in response to our ever-present angst, God invites us to let go and let God. That also means that all the dumb ways that we try to justify our existence and make

our lives meaningful are moot points. We are accepted, we are justified, and now we are invited to live not in isolation but in community with God and neighbor. We also have the gift of knowing that this life and the work we do in it is meaningful because God makes it so.

I am ever thankful my brother Dave knew about this kind of security and he lived it.

The great theologian Paul Tillich said that faith must include “an acceptance of our acceptance.” In other words, accept the fact that God accepts us as we are and invites us into a new community where we are free from that which imprisons us, and that includes money and things, and our propensity to find our security there. The freedom of the Gospel means we don’t hoard things and cling to our self-sufficiency.

But when we imagine that our lives are just a soliloquy, like the farmer does, divorced from God or fellow human beings, we become the worst kind of false god unto ourselves. This is illustrated by the story of a family who put up a hummingbird feeder that soon drew so many hummingbirds that they had to fill it daily. But suddenly this decreased to almost nothing. The feeder needed filling only about once a week. The reason? A male bird had taken over the feeder as his property. He was now the only hummingbird who used it. He would feed and then sit in a nearby tree, rising to attack any bird that approached his feeder. Guard duty occupied his every waking hour. By choosing to assume ownership of the feeder, he forfeited his freedom. He was possessed by his possession.

When one considers our nation on a macro scale, do we not see the same thing? Over the last 40 years, roughly 1% of our population has reaped the benefits of corporate profits, benefits largely not shared with the rest of us, including those upon whose backs they made that profit. This is basic economic data. I know it’s more complex than that because the 1% have also created jobs. My point is with respect to profits not being shared and wealth inequity growing while basic needs remain unmet.

Do we have enough to care for everyone? Without a doubt. But not if the feeder is being guarded by the bird that thinks the feeder is his. There is another way for we Christians, though, as we consider where we store God’s abundant blessings to us. As Martin Luther King once said in a sermon on this text, “we can store our surplus food free of charge in the shriveled stomachs of the millions of God’s children who go to bed hungry every night.”

Here is the truth of our text today: our lives and possessions are not our own. They belong to God. We are merely stewards of them for the time God has given us on this earth. We rebel against this truth because we want to be in charge of our lives and our

stuff. But we are not owners. We are stewards of what belongs to God and exists for the good of all, not just me and my tribe. What does that mean for our budgets at home? Our assets? What does it mean for the money we have at Mt Carmel – in our general fund, our various funds, our foundation?

But do not forget what good news this truth is, that we are stewards and not owners. Because all that we are and all that we have belongs to God, our future is secure beyond all measure. As Jesus tells us, “Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom” (12:32).

Let me close with an illustration that is a counterpoint to the farmer in our story today, and one that shatters the illusions we have about the meaning of life. A few years ago, there was a televised interview with a man who had lost his house and all his possessions to a raging brush fire driven by a Santa Ana winds in California. Recalling that his brother had recently mused that they should be careful not to allow their possessions to possess them, this man who had just seen everything he owned but the shirt on his back go up in smoke announced to the reporter with a note of unexpected triumph: “I am a free man now!”

It’s unlikely any of us would feel unambiguously free if we lost everything in a fire. And yet, what we own can indeed hold us prisoner if we live like atheists.

You, too, are invited to be free. Free to live, free to love, free to trust in your God who provides. Amen.