

Jesus tells us a parable this morning about a rich man who never enjoyed his wealth. Jesus doesn't give him a name, because truth be told, he could be anyone of us. The rich man of the parable was incredibly successful. Barns and fields and plentiful crops. Now this rich man was also a frugal man. He was money conscious we might say. Rich and frugal, this man was also a hardworking. He worked from sun-up till sundown. No time for rest because you have to make hay while the sun is shining. Then one year, his prudence and work ethic paid off. His land produced a bumper crop. The effort, the sweat, the toil, the rain, the sunshine produced a serendipitous result: crops that filled his silos and burst his barns. Now you'd think the man would be overjoyed by this unexpected surplus, wouldn't you? But unfortunately, that's not how it works. To have more is to want more. It's an endless cycle. The church father Ambrose once said of our rich friend that he had plenty of storage space for his grain in the mouths of the poor. But the man had bigger plans in mind: "I'll tear down my barns and build bigger ones. And then I'll have room to store my grain and my goods". Sounds reasonable, almost American, but there's one problem with his plan, he didn't factor in God's plan. Man proposes, but God disposes. God says, "You fool! Tonight, your life is required of you". All that stuff you so worried about, well it's all going to be tied up for years in probate, and all your money and wealth will be divided amongst government officials and greedy distant relatives. Rich beyond measure, but he dies poor. We all die poor. We brought nothing into this world and we can take nothing with us when we leave. But the rich man dies not only poor, but worse, he dies alone. No mention of a wife or family or friends. He had it all, but really, he had nothing. He never knew the joy of peaceful living. He was too busy gathering, piling, storing, investing, selling and scheming to ever take time to enjoy all the good things of life, which are usually free, by the way.

The book of Ecclesiastes calls all our trivial pursuits, meaningless and empty, a chasing after the wind. But we can't just say that the rich man in the parable had the wrong priorities. That the answer is just to be more religious and less worldly. Putting God first isn't the answer. God isn't first on a to-do list. God is closer to us than that. He lives and moves and has His being in us. He is the *all...in all*. The everything in anything. He is the cause of our causing; the movement, which gives rise to every motion. And so, the grain and the grape, the bread and the wine, the barns, the fields, cattle, and all my goods are not only gifts from the hand

of God, but the very expression of God Himself: He dwells in, with, and under all things. When we fail to confess God in this deep and profound way, we start to get religious. We turn our stuff into gods and we look to our material wealth for our identity, security, meaning and purpose. The reason we don't enjoy money and wealth is precisely because we have turned money into some kind of religion. From the moment we first touch money and learn of its power, we get religious. We have creeds about how to handle money: A penny saved is a penny earned. We have commandments concerning money: Don't spend it all in one place. We have catchy mantras like "money can't buy happiness BUT it can buy the things that make you happy". And so, we treat money as if it were some kind of holy thing. It's even a crime to destroy it. You're desecrating a sacrament, after all. And the result of this religion of money? We're miserable, stingy, anxious. Idols always consume their communicants. Whatever is your god, becomes the focus of your fear, your love, your trust. That's why we're so sensitive about money because when we talk about it, we're treading on holy ground. Luther once said that the wallet is the most sensitive part of our body. Now, don't get me wrong, money isn't bad in itself. It's a gift from God, like grain and rain and sunshine. It's not money per se, but the religion of money. That's what robs us of joy. If you lost it all tomorrow, all your money, possessions would you still be joyful? I'd like to say I would be, but I have my doubts. And that worries me. Because I talk a lot about faith and trust, but do I myself believe what I say? If I do, then faith in Christ produces joy no matter what befalls me. Faith trusts that this world holds no lasting appeal, that all of its pleasures are fleeting and illusory. Faith is acknowledging that your life is not found in yourself: in your possessions, trophies, honors, and accomplishments. Our lives are borrowed from the life of God. What keeps us alive is not the beating of our hearts, but the God from whom all life flows. And all of this comes to us by grace, it is a gift from God, pure and simple. When we trust in Christ, then, we're free to let go, to hit the pause button and just enjoy existence; to enjoy our labors, and eat our daily bread with thanksgiving. To be rich toward God, that's the secret. For what does any of it really mean? We will all pass from this earth and be forgotten like countless generations before us. But while we live let us truly live. For tomorrow we might die, but today we are alive and that's a gift. Amen.