

The Rich Fool

The readings for today are from the Revised Common Lectionary, which is used by most mainline Protestant as well as Catholic and Orthodox churches to decide which scripture readings to use. Often the readings coincide with the time of year. Luke sets his story of the Rich Fool in harvest time.

Before we get into the story, we need to realize something about the person who wrote the Gospel of Luke. He was most likely a fairly well-off Greek, writing for fairly well-off people, most likely in the neighborhood of Syria, some 100 years after the death of Jesus. By that time, stories about Jesus that had been passed on by word of mouth, and then written down had undergone some interpretation. In Luke's interpretation, he misses the possibility that Jesus was telling a joke, and instead of just giving us the basics, Luke has Jesus say that the moral of the story is that folks who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God will somehow be brought to an early death, just as they are congratulating themselves on their good fortune. This seems to go along with the reading from that grouchy Preacher who wrote Ecclesiastes in the name of the great King Solomon. He says

it's all useless anyway, and wisdom means nothing if after all your years of hard work you leave it to some idiot at the end.

In order to get at what Jesus may have originally been talking about, let's assume that a lot of that wisdom Jesus taught had as its purpose the undermining of the Roman occupation that was indeed wooing some people away from the Jewish concern with God's distributive justice-compassion. Then let's take the version of the parable of the rich fool not from Luke and his editorializing, but from the sayings gospel of Thomas 63: 1-3.

Let me set the scene:

So Jesus is relaxing around a fire with his followers after a meal on the road. The wine is passing hand to hand, and some of the women are also participating, because on this particular occasion there are no "pharisees" or "tax collectors" or other collaborators with Rome around who might object. Perhaps they are discussing the unfairness of those monied classes who can buy their way out of just about anything, including God's law. Maybe, because Jesus was a teacher of the Wisdom tradition, they knew what King Solomon had to say about the futility

of working all your life and then giving it over to someone who either won't know how to manage it so that it can stay in the family, or – as is more likely, given the presumed poverty of Jesus's itinerant band – why bother working all your life and then losing it all to debt? Things may have been getting a bit gloomy there around the fire, especially if an entire family may have just joined them who had indeed lost everything, and just barely escaped selling themselves into slavery.

Jesus says, "There was a rich person who had a great deal of money." The group collectively roll their eyes and poke each other. "Here it comes."

"So this rich person says, 'I shall invest my money so that I may sow, reap, plant, and fill my storehouses with produce, so that I may lack nothing.'"

"That sounds about right!"

"These were the things he was thinking in his heart," Jesus continues, "but that very night he died."

Silence. There is no more to the story. Then one of the women lets loose with a long giggle, and they are all rolling and laughing and slapping each other. Even the new family can join in the joke, because for now – and Jesus is always insisting that “now” is all there is – they have bread and wine and a place to stay. Living well is the best revenge.

So– What do you think?

I want to make three interpretive points, and then let’s spend a few minutes discussing.

First, Jesus is reminding us that – as the Preacher says in Ecclesiastes – it’s all blowing in the wind anyway.

Second, the Preacher makes two points about “the good.” The first is that everyone’s duty is to love God and keep God’s commandments. Jesus constantly reminds us that that is what it means to participate in God’s realm of distributive justice-compassion. The second point the Preacher makes is that life is God’s gift, and life is the portion of God’s realm that humanity is responsible for.

Third, it is dangerous to be so caught up in a paradigm that we can't see any alternative – such as the Rich Fool. Regardless of which paradigm we swim in, like the fish who has no clue where the hooked worm comes from, we can be destroyed by what we don't know or what we ignore. Choosing to live in God's realm of distributive justice-compassion does not mean that we blithely pay no attention to the realities of life in the 21st century. By the same token, to consciously or unconsciously sell out to immediate self-interest, to act in ways that do not sustain life – whether human and non-human – is the height of irresponsibility. To the extent that we ignore the consequences of unsustainable policies, whether economic or political, collective or individual, we indeed court the “wrath of God,” not as apocalyptic interventionist retribution, but simply as the result.

We might call it Karma.