

First Presbyterian Church
Luke 12:13-21, “Parable of the Barn Builder”
by Pastor Matt Johnson, 7/26/2026

Welcome, everyone, to the second week of this series
on the Stories that Jesus’ Told.

Last week I shared that:

- 1) Parables are stories normal people can relate to**
- 2) Parables are theology wrapped in metaphors**
- 3) Parables address the whole person (not just how to think)**
- 4) Because of 1-3, Parables are able to look beneath the surface of life**

That is to say, these are stories that, if we sit with them long enough,
will unpack our lives and habits and allegiances.

They aren’t rules or doctrines,
they are metaphors that accompany us in life,
and if we listen, they will get in below
the surface level of our conscious experience
and point us back toward the way of Jesus’ love.

Today’s parable is about a man whose crops grow so plentifully,
he needs to build more barns.

Do you know of something wrong with plentiful crops?

Is there anyone here with an objection to building barns?

Well I don’t think you’d find people in biblical times who had big problems
with these things, either.

But there’s an initial interaction in this passage that we can easily miss.

In fact, it’s the whole foundation for Jesus’ story.

If we move past it too quickly and only dwell on the building of barns,
we could miss the point.

It begin when a man comes to Jesus and says, “Teacher” (Luke’s word for rabbi),
“Tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me.”

Divide the inheritance. I bet there’s more than a few people in this room
who hear that phrase and get a chill down your spine.

The dividing of inheritance was a very sensitive problem in ancient times and remains a source of conflict for many families today.

Because this man is asking Jesus to make his brother do this, there is a concern for justice at stake here.

This guy feels wronged. He's been cut out.

His brother is taking more than his fair share. This guy is a victim!

And he knows Jesus is one who lifts up the oppressed and calls the powerful to account.

He may have even heard Jesus announce, "Ask and you will receive; Seek and you will find, Knock, and the door will be opened to you!"

So here he is, asking, seeking, knocking for justice. Will Jesus help him?

Well...Jesus doesn't oppose this man's cry for justice.

But he does refuse to be an authority in this man's family quarrel.

Some rabbis did (and do) serve this kind of role, but Jesus is not operating in that way.

Jesus calls him "Man," – which middle eastern scholar

Kenneth Bailey notes is a strong and discourteous phrase.

"Man, who appointed me a judge or arbiter?"

As I've already pointed out, the man asks about an inheritance, and Jesus tells a story about barn building.

They could not be more different in terms of subject matter.

But if we read between the lines,

we will recognize that Jesus is inviting this man ...

and all those who hear the parable ... to stand alongside him and consider things from another angle.

The story Jesus tells addresses the man's inner disruption by indirection.

Eugene Peterson notes that "We tell lies with the same words

we use to tell the truth. Words not only can reveal; they can conceal.

Was this man's request to Jesus in a matter of justice a smoke screen obscuring something quite different?

Jesus thought it was. His story blew the smoke away."

This passage is carefully constructed.

The Parable begins / ends with a wisdom saying (v. 15, v. 21)

v. 15 “Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed [insatiable desires]; life does not consist in an abundance of possessions.”

Examples... (both desires & surpluses)

The parable itself begins with a statement of abundance (v. 16), and ends with a statement of ruin (v. 20).

So it's a tragic tale of riches to rags.

The action of the story is in the middle three verses:

17: Problem: I have too much grain!

18: Solution in the present: I will build bigger barns.

19: Prediction for the future: Life will be easy for me.

SLIDE:

v. 15 Wisdom saying: “Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed. Life does not consist in an abundance of possessions.”

v. 16 Statement of abundance

17: Problem: I have too much grain!

18: Solution in the present: I will build bigger barns.

19: Prediction for the future: Life will be easy for me.

v. 20 Statement of ruin

v. 21 Wisdom saying: “This is how it will be with those who store up things for themselves but are not rich toward God.”

Kenneth Bailey points out another dynamic of the story that we might not pick up on as modern readers:

In the story, the man has a dialogue with himself.

That makes this a very sad text.

He notes that ancient people, and many non-western cultures still today, always made up their minds about a problem after a long series of conversations with their friends and neighbors.

Through this discussion, you come to a conclusion about what to do.
But this man doesn't seem to have any friends,
because he talks with himself.

Have you noticed that, the more wealth people acquire,
the further they withdraw from other people?
If you don't have much money, you live in an apartment where
you share walls with neighbors and interact with them
bringing up your groceries or going out to work.

But if you get a little more money, you can buy a house with a garage,
and you don't need to interact with your neighbors as much.
If you a little more money than that,
then you can afford a larger property,
and your neighbors might not know who you are at all,
unless you take time to engage them intentionally.
And if you're fabulously rich, you can buy an island or a super yacht,
and you don't have any neighbors at all.
So if you need to make a decision, you can only speak to yourself.
This strikes the Hebrew imagination as incredibly sad.

We see that the farmer's problem in the parable revolves around himself,
"What to do with my crops?" He believes they belong to him.
In ancient times the proper thing to do with excess crops like this
is to put it into the mouths of those in need.

But he finds another idea: Build bigger barns.
And while discussing the building of barns, notice that he talks
like he can do everything by himself (as one person)!

"I will tear down, I will build, I will store up, I will say to myself..."
He envisions himself as a prototype of the American ideal –
the self-made man.

Then at the end of the parable he will say to himself,
"Time to relax – eat, drink, and be merry!"

The word "be merry" is based on the Greek word, *euphron*,
which is a compound word from "eu" which means good,
and "phren" which means mind, or heart.

So someone who experiences “euphron” has a full heart and a glad mind.

But God will says to “You fool!” And the Greek word for fool is *aphron*, which is the complete opposite of *euphron*.

An *aphron* is someone with an empty mind, an empty herat.
They are a fool.

God flips this farmer’s assessment on hits head.

“No – you have the situation entirely backwards.

You’re going to die tomorrow,
and then who will get what you’ve saved up?”

Because, remember, this man is so rich,
he has no neighbors and speaks only to himself.

That’s the parable. But what’s the connection between the parable
and the man who was asking for justice in dividing his brother’s inheritance?

Jesus is inviting this man who fights with his brother to change perspectives.

Not from “what is mine and what is yours” but from
“who does any of this really belong to?”

If the man can hear this story and recognize
that he’s about to lose a relationship over a fight about money,
maybe he would reframe the conversation.

What if he were to ask his brother,
“How can we act as stewards before God with this inheritance?”

In our world, given the wealth of our society
and our relative wealth compared to our global neighbors,
we should all pay attention to Jesus’ story –
even if we don’t think ourselves to be especially wealthy.
Perhaps especially if we aren’t that wealthy, but we could have been ... if only.

If only that promotion had come through. If only that divorce hadn’t happened.

If only I had invested differently.

If only my family had divvied up the inheritance with me fairly.

If only...

Given that this series is about stories, I figured I should tell a story. But which one?

I first thought of telling a story about the people in our world
with so much money they are literally build barns
and filling them with computer processors to run AI chat-bots
who (the rich people hope) will take away all the workers
at their companies so it really is just them,
all by themselves.

But the chatbots will talk with them so they maybe they won't be lonely?

Then I thought about telling the story of a barn-building man
who became fabulously rich through *subprime* automobile loans,
then bought the Portland Trailblazers
and is currently attempting to wring \$600 million from the state
and the city of Portland while firing huge numbers
of people in the organization.

When the long-time play-by-play announcer Kevin Calabaro
revealed he was moving on from the team this weekend,
he said the Blazer's new contract offers were "subprime."

But then I thought, why tell a sad story
when I could tell a story full of hope and promise?

Because it turns out that while working on this sermon,
two women came into the office and one of them asked
if I knew of anyplace that can help with clothing
or basics for a house like curtains and linens.

Typically, when people come to the church office asking about resources,
they are asking for themselves.

But this woman was actually asking because she used to be
(by her own telling of the story) homeless,
living out of her car for three years and using drugs.

Now she's sober, she's got a job and housing,
and she wants to help out other people.

So I pointed her to some local resources for those kinds of things.

Then she told me a story. The story of giving a box of clothes
and shoes to her boyfriend's family in Mexico,
and how his mother put on shoes that fit her properly
for the first time in years.

The woman said that now she feels so much better
and is actually walking differently.

Next she said, "What about volunteer opportunities?

Do you have anything like that?"

And so I told her about Community Dinner
and how to get involved there,
and she recalled that she had dinner here
during her time of being homeless as well.

Now this woman isn't one with a lot of material wealth.

But in Jesus' eyes she's richer than the barn builders of the world.
She's rich in love, she's rich in community,
and she's rich in her ability to see the world more clearly
than those who store up more and more
in their ever expanding barns
within their ever diminishing communities.

Parables aren't rulebooks to follow.

They are stories that the Holy Spirit uses to give us new eyes and ears
when it comes to our own lives, our own challenges.

So what have you heard today?

What story is the Spirit drawing you into?