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## The Liturgy of Abundance

### Luke 12:13-21

A Sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on August 4, 2013 by the Rev. Luke Powery

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They tend to hold onto a large number of items that most people would consider not useful or valuable. Junk mail, old catalogues and newspapers, things that might help make crafts, clothes that "might" be worn sometime in the future, broken things, "freebies" from department stores. Their home can be so cluttered that parts of it are inaccessible and can no longer be used. Beds that can't be slept in. Kitchens that can't be used for food preparation. Refrigerators filled with rotting food. Stovetops covered with junk mail as well as old food piled on top of burners. Tables so covered that they can't be used for dining. Chairs or sofas that no one wants to sit in. Unsanitary bathrooms. Tubs, showers, and sinks filled with items so they can't be used for their usual purpose. Collecting animals they can't even care for; and because of this, animal feces cover the floors of the home (watch your step!). The clutter, the mess, is so bad, bad to the bone. These people are called hoarders and there's even a documentary series that airs on the A&E television network with the same name—*Hoarders*.

This series depicts the real-life struggles and treatment of people who suffer from compulsive hoarding. Compulsive hoarding may be called pathological collecting, or just plain old packratting. It is a pattern of behavior that is characterized by the excessive acquisition of many items and the inability or unwillingness to discard of them to such an extent that they cover the living areas of one's home and cause significant distress, impairment, or even illness. The show, *Hoarders*, presents 60-minute episodes that show 1 or 2 interventions. Each hoarder is assigned a team made up of a psychologist, an organizer, and cleaning specialists. This team helps the hoarders by conducting a two to three day decluttering session. The cleanup sessions aim to teach the hoarder new behaviors while making the home livable and usable again. These interventions are necessary because many times a crisis, like the threat of eviction or removal of minor children, sparks the intervention.

What is intriguing to me is that apparently *Hoarders* debuted as the most-watched series premiere in A&E network history among adults aged 18–49 and tied for the most ever among adults aged 25–54. Why are people drawn to this show? I wonder if in some way it represents our lives on steroids.

We know about clutter and one might just call this hoarding inclination 'excessive clutter' or one may see it as a liturgy of some kind, an established ritual or pattern or *ordo* (Latin). The word "liturgy" or in Greek *leitourgia*, is composed of the words "work" and "people." Thus, it literally refers to "the work of the people." In ancient Greece, liturgy was a public work, something done to benefit the city or state; it could be paying taxes or donating services. It implies human agency, something we do. In the case of the hoarders, one might call it a "liturgy of abundance" in which one works toward an abundance of possessions. Possessions by themselves are not necessarily problematic. Problems arise in relation to our relationship to them. What we do with them and why we have them.

This liturgy is not always beautiful as the A&E network show reveals and as indicated by an apparent disagreement over a family inheritance in our bible passage. "Tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me." Jesus wants no part of that family feud. Possessions, things, can get in the way of family relationships, straining family relationships. Even in the ancient world, there were disputes over dividing the family inheritance and there were regulations for such disputes (Num 27:1-11 Deut 21:15-17). This kind of dispute is all too familiar in our time. Hagglng over furniture, dishes, silverware, jewelry, the house, the land, the savings account left by the deceased. But Jesus refuses to be a referee in this familial wrestling match. Rather he calls it like he sees it—"be on your guard against all kinds of greed." Greed is at the root of this family feud. At least this is what Jesus implies.

Greed sustains this liturgy of abundance because contrary to what Jesus teaches, it teaches that one's life consists in the abundance of possessions. "Be on your guard against all kinds of greed." Yet, what we don't hear is when is enough, enough. How do we know when we're being greedy? Jesus does not say not to prepare for a rainy day but that your life is not equivalent to your possessions. The rich farmer appears to be a wise businessman whose land produced abundantly and the abundant growth is also due to rain and sunshine, natural factors. He plans for the future by building larger storage units as his possessions grow. He tells himself that he has "ample goods laid up for many years." He's set for retirement so he can "relax, eat, drink, [and] be merry." He's worked hard. He's run no scams. He's not a thief nor does he mistreat his workers. He is not unjust but according to Jesus he is a fool. "He lives for himself, talks to himself, plans for himself, congratulates himself" (Fred Craddock), appearing only to live in the orbit of his own universe. "He thought to himself, "What should I do?" He said to himself, "I will do this: I will...I will...And I will say to my soul." He's in his own individual world, his own liturgy of abundance and no one else is in attendance. He is an audience of one.

Yet his liturgy is not stronger than his death. The clock ticks down to his death. Former Apple CEO Steve Jobs was right: "death is the destination we all share." "This very night your life is being demanded of you." The rich farmer was so consumed with his things he had no concern for his life even though we've heard that tomorrow is not promised to anyone. This man's tomorrow was about to be terminated.

How dangerous it is when a person thinks they have it all and in a split second can lose it all—a heart attack, a brain aneurysm, a car crash. They do not consider death although the spiritual says, "death is a robber" and robbers come unexpectedly. This is why attending funerals are fruitful for spiritual direction. Unlike Mark Twain who said, "I didn't attend the funeral, but I sent a nice letter saying I approved of it," go to funerals because facing the reality of dying helps us in our living. Facing our own mortality should help deepen our spirituality, to show us what is truly important in life. There is nothing like death to teach us about life. And life does not consist of the abundance of possessions. We march to the grave empty-handed. No Wii video games or Xbox or iPhones. You come into the world naked with no possessions and you leave naked. The Ronald McDonald house on Central Campus reminds me of the fragility of life and of what is important. When you meet a young woman who just had a double lung transplant, you can't help but have your life refocused. The rich farmer didn't have the benefit of Ronald McDonald so he decides to build larger barns for all of his stuff.

He appears to hoard which puts goods in place of God, making greed his god. He stored up treasures for himself but was not rich toward God. In Colossians, greed is called idolatry. Greed seeks possessions, which is not equivalent to true living and these possessions function as substitutes for the proper object of our worship—God. The liturgy of abundance fueled by greed suggests that we own things, possess them, and that they are ours, yet the irony in this liturgy is that possessions possess us to such an extent that we become like them as we bow at the altar of materiality. In this liturgy presided over by greed, we then become things, losing our humanity, losing our soul, losing our life. We become "thingified." The god of greed makes us into its image and it is nothing but full of things. At this altar full of abundant possessions, where your treasure is, there your heart is also (Luke 12:33-34). If your treasure is a thing, you may become like the Tin Man from the Wizard of Oz who had no heart though he yearned for one.

The heart of this liturgy of abundance is rooted in fear because greed stems from fear and anxiety which is why in the larger literary context of this passage in chapter 12 Jesus says over and over "do not fear" (Luke 12:4), "do not be afraid" (Luke 12:7, 32), "do not worry" (Luke 12:11, 22). One grasps after things, one hoards, as a means of securing one's future because one is unaware or disbelieves that God is aware of them and their needs, that God will provide, that "even the hairs of your head are all counted" and "you are of more value than many sparrows" (Luke 12:7). In this liturgy of abundance, there is fear of scarcity, that there is not enough or will not be enough. Old Testament scholar, Walter Brueggemann writes that "we have a love affair with 'more'—and we will never have enough" if we adhere to the myth of scarcity.

This liturgy of abundance also perpetuates the idea that the amount of possessions one has correlates with our worth as a human being. Jesus counters the notion that human worth is dependent on capital net worth and teaches that people and their needs are more important than material possessions. “Life is more than food and the body more than clothing”(Luke 12:23). It is not that the material world is insignificant but Jesus reprioritizes what is significant in life. “One’s life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.” Yet in this setting, Jesus does not necessarily call one to make a vow of poverty either. However, I believe his words pierce the heart of human desire.

Human greed is an expression of human desire. Perhaps we desire so much at times because at the heart of our own desires is to be desired. We strive to gain more things, to hoard more possessions in order to surround ourselves with material goods only to find out that these things have no heart and cannot desire nor love us in return. We may love these things, but they cannot love us in return. They cannot fill our desire to be desired. Thus we can quickly become dissatisfied with something because it hasn’t loved us in the way we want or need to be loved so we go and add other things to our barns. We don’t want this liturgy of so-called abundance to stop. We fill our lives with stuff because we are afraid to be alone. That’s part of the fear. We do not want to be alone, by ourselves, empty-handed, with empty barns and lots of room in our hearts but no one to fill the void. We can look so full yet simultaneously be empty like the bloated belly of a child suffering from starvation and malnutrition.

Medieval theologian Thomas Aquinas said that greed “is a sin directly against one's neighbor, since one... cannot over-abound in external riches, without another ... lacking them.” Greed does resist love of another because it is so self-absorbed but this self-absorption in this liturgy of abundance also represents an absence of the experience of love in the life of the person possessed by greed. Greed reveals one’s feeling of lovelessness.

This is why greed represents our deep desire to be in communion, to be in fellowship, relationship in order to be loved. Greed grasps for love. But greed is warped love, a distortion of love, because rather than being in the presence of a person, we find ourselves in the presence of and fill our lives with inanimate objects, material idols, grains and crops, lots of goodies. Therefore, our own greed becomes god, which means that god is no one else but us. Now that is a scary thought! Sadly, we may have closer relationships with things than with people thus it is not love, but lust. Through this liturgy of abundance, we are led to inhumane living because we lose our humanity. Greed is anti-human because it goes against what it means to be human. To be human is to be in relationship with other humans; to love as one is loved. From the beginning, in the beginning, to be in the image of God meant to be in relationship with one another, human to human—“Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness...So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them”(Gen 1:28-27). Greed is an aberration of the created order but fundamentally at its heart greed is a sign of one’s desire to be loved and desired. One is just shaped by the wrong liturgy of abundance. In the holy temple of the hoarders, greed presides over the liturgy of abundance. But in the presence of a holy God, love leads a different liturgy of abundance.

Isn’t that the opposite of greed anyway? Love. Perfect love casts out fear (1 John 4:18), the root of greed. Love follows a different liturgical protocol. It is still a liturgy of abundance but one that God guides in which love “does not insist on its own way”(1 Cor 13) quite distinct from those who “store up treasures for themselves.” In this liturgy of abundance, God is rich toward us. Love propels the divine outward gaze. This liturgy promises “daily bread”(Luke 11). This liturgy tells us to “consider the lilies”(Luke 12:27). This liturgy promises that it is “the Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom”(Luke 12:32). A gospel of accumulation will not satisfy you. Only God’s love can. “Love supreme”(John Coltrane). “God’s abundance transcends the market economy”(Brueggmann), our stuff. We hear it earlier in Luke, “What does it profit [a person] to gain the whole world, but lose or forfeit [him/herself]?”(Luke 9:25) God is not interested in your stuff, your things, your possessions. God is interested in your life, which is more than the abundance of possessions.

Possessing everything does not save one's life and ultimately does not satisfy your deep desire to be loved. You can have everything but have nothing. No life. And we can't possess our own lives as a commodity to be hoarded because life is a gift. Breath is not our creation. It is given from God. Can you imagine if God was greedy and hoarded this world for himself? But from the beginning, in the beginning, God generously loves the world, us, into being, and declares "it was good." God shares the abundance of his creation, redemption, and sustenance with us by freely sharing his divine life through breath. The root of this generous liturgy of abundance is love. A love that grounds God's ethic of generosity that despises hoarding goods and promotes the sharing of them. In this liturgy of abundance, we recognize that our end will end in God's love and nothing can separate us from God (Rom 8). That means we do not have to fear any longer nor be anxious nor frantic nor greedy with a hoarder disorder because in God we meet the true object of our desires and the one who desires to love us beyond comprehension. God desires us and in God we meet "the desire of all nations"(Haggai 2:7). Our ultimate desire and destination. In God, we meet our home. And when we hear "this very night your life is being demanded of you" we can be at peace because we would have already known God just as we have been known by God.

This liturgy of abundance reveals that there is actually enough for everyone in the world. In this liturgy, hoarding ceases. Bread is broken and shared as an emblem of God's "manna economy"(Andrea Biehler). There is enough food for the world at God's banquet table. The communion table is a sacramental subversion and reordering of public life, the way life is, while gesturing toward the way life should be. Everything you need and desire is at the table—not possessions but to be possessed by a love that will not let us go. A love embodied in Jesus Christ who is the bread of life for the world. He is enough. He satisfies. Come receive your life from a God who desires to be in communion with you. Do not worry. Be not anxious.

The rich farmer was right about one thing. "Relax, eat, drink [and even] be merry" because this is a Eucharist, a table of thanksgiving. Taste its abundance and you'll see that the Lord is good.