

“Not Entitled” – Luke 12:13-21

Why is it that some of the easiest lessons to learn, or at least understand, are the most difficult to implement, to live out? Take the lesson presented in Luke’s gospel this morning for an example. The message seems simple enough. I think most people reading this little passage would easily get the point. And yet with people both within the Christian faith and without, the message seems to be more and more ignored.

The message? It is even summed up nicely in the third sentence: “one’s life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.” That’s pretty simple and straightforward, isn’t it? Jesus even went on to illustrate the point with the familiar parable about the man who laid up tons of treasure for himself, only to discover that it was all to be inherited and owned by someone else, because his life was over.

Of course, if we start digging a bit, we discover that there is a bit more to the message than just the obvious statement. Consider for a moment, is the message here that owning many things, or being rich, or even being filthy rich, is the problem? Not really. The problem is being owned by the possessions, or merely by the desire to own the possessions. It’s not so much about being wealthy as being consumed greed, by an overwhelming desire to be wealthy, in particular to the point that your relationship with God and your relationships with other people are destroyed.

I had opportunity last week to see some wondrous examples of this parable being lived out. I’m assuming the people involved were fairly intelligent, certainly capable of hearing and understanding the simple message in this lesson from Luke’s gospel, and yet they were – and are – living examples of people who have let the desire for possessions overwhelm and destroy whatever personality they might have had.

I saw two of these examples while I was leaning on the rail on the dock at Lund Harbour. I had pulled my boat out of the water the evening before, and was waiting for Elizabeth, Davie, and Gennie to come over from Savary Island on the water taxi. I had slept on my boat on shore (parked on the side of the road near Lund) and had wandered down to have breakfast at Nancy’s Bakery, and to act like a tourist. One of the first things I noticed was a humongous boat – a fifty-footer – tied up in the Loading Zone. It had obviously come in overnight, and was still there at 9:00am. Now, the Loading Zone is just that – it is a section of dock meant to be used for no more than 10 minutes at a time for loading or unloading people and stuff. The tie-up rail is painted bright yellow, and there is a big sign saying, “Loading Zone – 10 minute maximum.” This fifty-foot yacht took up all the long side of the zone, and stuck twenty feet out into the channel to the ramp besides, blocking the short side of the zone. There was no activity on the boat, as the occupants were sleeping in. I soon discovered that the reason they were sleeping in was that they had partied loudly all night, disturbing a lot of people trying to sleep on their boats.

Rick, the harbour master, soon roused them, telling them they needed to clear the loading zone and that if they didn’t they would be not only grounded on the lowering tide, but in serious trouble with him. As they were getting ready to pull out, Rick asked them what they intended to do about paying – at which they were surprised and offended! Now, this is at least \$3 million worth of boat (I’m guessing all the boat that drug money could buy) and they had trouble rounding up the \$40 for mooring for the night! It was clear to the other hangers-on with whom I was enjoying this spectacle that this crowd had no intention of paying, but got caught by sleeping in. The sheer arrogance that they felt entitled to completely clog the harbour, inconveniencing a lot of people, was palpable.

The second example was similar, although this time instead of a party crowd was made up of two “Norman Rockwell” archtypical American families from Bellevue, Washington. This gang pulled up to the fuel dock, disgorging at least six young people along with their parents, and a dog. They took on fuel, and took on fuel, and took on fuel. They also took on water – for which there is a \$10 fee – and I guess they wanted to get all their money’s worth, because after they filled their water tank they hosed down the whole boat. I should mention that at the same time there was another boat – a Canadian thirty-six footer – that had fueled, and then the folks went ashore, either to get some groceries, have a coffee, build a house, or retire, because I never saw them come back.

Now, the fuel dock at Lund is not particularly large, and these two boats, along with a third, took up almost all the available space. Meanwhile, several other boats were circling waiting to get to the dock to fuel up. As the Bellevue boat finished fueling and washing down, one of the mothers and two of the children head up the ramp to the store, further delaying the operation and the waiting, circling boats. In the meantime, one of the young lads takes a bag of garbage up the ramp to the garbage man at the top – this is a retiree who makes a living of collecting the garbage, at \$3/bag, primarily from people returning from Savary Island but also from passing boats, and taking it to the dump in Powell River. When the young lad discovers he needs to fork over \$3 for the bag, he returns to the boat, at which point he is instructed to get the bag back. The task actually fell to the mother, because she was returning from the store. Again, this was at least a million dollars worth of boat; they put close to \$2,000 worth of fuel into it; but were too cheap to pay \$3 to drop a bag of garbage!

But it’s the third example that comes the closest to the parable Jesus offered. On Savary Island, next to the place that Elizabeth and her sisters own, there is an old log house that was purchased a few years ago. The new owner Richard is a bit of a mystery, since they are only there about one week per year, but obviously has a great deal of money if not taste. I heard from another neighbour there, Steve, a wonderful man who loves to meet and chat with everyone, about his first encounter with Richard, who apparently walked up to Steve with these opening words, “I’m Richard H. I just sold my company for \$700 million. Who are you?” Compounding this incredible display of a lack of personality, he continued to ask Steve about another resident, an engineer, and when Steve told him where that person was, the response was, “Good. At least there’s one person on this island with whom I can relate!”

The sheer arrogance, the appalling gall seem to me to be clear symptoms of someone who has completely lost their soul in the scramble for money – which seems confirmed by the research I did on him online, discovering that he was the co-founder of a financial institution that prospered on selling ‘derivatives’ – those fraudulent mortgage packages that virtually destroyed the US and global economy, as well as destroying peoples’ lives through evaporating their pensions and other life savings. It is not my place to judge him, but I must confess to a yearning for some divine justice.

There is a common thread running through these three examples – and, I believe, in the message from the gospel. That common thread is a sense of feeling entitled, a state of mind in which a person feels they are ‘due’ things such as respect or deference simply because they are wealthy. We see it everywhere, from the rampant and bizarre demands made by movie stars to the drivers of luxury cars at four-way stops to people parking across (yes, across!) two disabled parking spots, presumably because they were “too precious” to pull into a regular spot.

But, thanks be to God, that kind of behaviour is not the whole story, because there are many more people who get the message that we are not entitled. That we do not deserve respect,

or deference, or even groveling from other people simply because we might have many possessions, or even much wealth. There are many, many people out there – and in here! – who understand that what we have is a gift from God, and by his grace and mercy. Each and every day is an occasion to rise in the morning and say “thank you, God” for another day, and for the opportunity to praise God and to enjoy this wondrous world. Another day to enjoy the company of and to love our neighbours.

And there are neighbours who are easily loveable, like the two men who at a simple request helped me move my disabled boat from the dock to the trailer. Like the garbage man on the dock, with whom I have had a number of delightful conversations over the years. Like the gang on Savary who jockey and jostle the moorings so that everyone has a place for their boat and everyone’s boat is safe. Like the BC Ferries people directing traffic, making sure that people are loaded in the order in which they arrived (reservations people excepted, of course!) and doing their best to try to get as many on as possible. Like people who head over to Cobs to grab trays of bread, or greet people, or arrange bulletins, or participate in the service, or support the work of the congregation in many other ways. People who understand this lesson from Luke’s gospel, who realize that we are not entitled, but we are truly blessed by the grace of God.