

July 31, 2016: Eighteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Pilgrim United Church of Christ

Rev. Mandy Mizelle Norris

[Luke 12:13-21](#) and [Hosea 11:1-11](#)

(Note: the Hosea passage we heard in worship was read from the Jewish Study Bible, a slightly different translation from the one linked above.)

Considering all scriptural possibilities, you may wonder how we end up with the passages we read together each week. Who or what picks these passages, like a great claw crane arcade game, reaching down into a mountain of biblical texts -- a massive mix of authors and genres: poetry, law, narrative, letters... -- dumping two into our orders of service each Sunday?

Now that I'm imagining it, I wish we did have a biblical stories claw machine to play each week. I love those games.

Our readings may seem that happenstance, but that's of course not how it works. Some of you know that we have a kind of Bible story calendar -- called the lectionary -- that gives us four texts each week: a reading from the Hebrew scriptures, or what Christians often refer to as the Old Testament; a psalm; a reading from one of the New Testament letters; and a passage from one of the four gospels, the narratives of the life of Jesus. At Pilgrim, we usually choose two of the lectionary readings -- often one from the Hebrew scriptures and one from the New Testament.

Sometimes I look at the readings and think, "Jesus, take the wheel. Take the laptop. Take the mic." I don't know what to say; I don't know what to *think*; but somebody's got some 'splainin' to do.

Because sometimes the lectionary lands on texts that are especially challenging or annoying: they're extra patriarchal or violent, they're even

stranger than the Bible's baseline strange, or they initially seem irrelevant to what's going on in our community and world...

Sometimes. But not today.

Today, the "The Parable of the Rich Fool," as recorded by Luke, comes to us the week after Donald Trump officially became one of our nominees for president.

It's like the lectionary gods have brought out the tee and are looking on like Bill Clinton during all the speeches at the DNC last week.

Many of us know this "rich fool" story: the story of Jesus warning against greed, and telling a parable about an affluent guy who planned to build bigger and bigger barns to store up all his goods and coast through life -- except God interrupts his daydream, calling him a fool, reminding him of his impending mortality and the shortsightedness and self-centeredness of his imagination.

Even if the story isn't familiar, the message is, right? The message so often echoed by Jesus, and by the raging prophets that came before him: a dire warning against the accumulation of wealth and dependence on possessions that inevitably distract us from the kingdom of God -- that distance us from God, even.

But parables aren't meant to be familiar, at least not by the end of their telling. They aren't meant to confirm what we already know, or congratulate us on how well we are doing. Parables are intentionally provocative stories, as Dr. Amy-Jill Levine reminds us. Though we have successfully managed to domesticate them -- along with their controversial teller -- Jesus' original audiences, his fellow Jews, knew these powerful short stories were meant to challenge them to see and think about and respond to the world differently after hearing.

Professor Levine wonders if we “might be better off thinking less about what [parables] ‘mean’ and more about what they ‘do’: provoke, refine, confront, disturb When we seek universal morals from a genre that is designed to surprise, challenge, shake up, or indict and [instead] look for a single meaning in a form that opens to multiple interpretations, we are necessarily limiting the parables and, so, ourselves” (*Short Stories by Jesus*, 4).

May we not limit the stories we sing are lamps unto our feet. May we not limit ourselves. Most importantly, may we not limit God.

Echoing the poetic words from the prophet Hosea, when we are summoned upward, may we rise...

Though Luke’s passage seems to particularly implicate avarice -- extreme greed for wealth or material gain -- remember that Jesus prefaces the parable by cautioning his hearers to “be on your guard against *all kinds of greed*.” That’s a broad warning, considering all the ways we can be greedy.

The Greek word translated here as *greed* -- πλεονεξίας, transliterated pleonexia -- means “covetousness” or, and this is what I find fascinating, “advantage,” and, sometimes, “*desire for advantage*.”

Jesus said to them, “Be on guard against all kinds of advantage...”

Wellllllllllllllllllllllll. Insert expletive here.

We may not think of ourselves as greedy, but how often, in how many places, in relation to whom, are we advantaged, or do we desire to be?

I imagine the people who had pushed their way to the front of the crowd surrounding Jesus suddenly shuffling their feet and crouching down.

“And then he told them a parable.” Reading that phrase in the gospels is essentially the equivalent of hearing *dun dun dunnnn* sound effects. Whenever Jesus begins a parable, he is about to take things to a whole new level, it’s about to get real, there is not a cute little feel good story coming up -- no matter how we have translated, wrapped them up, and passed them along more than two thousand years later.

Many of us hear this parable and disconnect ourselves because we’re not rich, or at least we don’t think we are. Others of us disconnect ourselves because, well, sure, we have much more than we need, but we also give a lot away: to church, to organizations like Housing for New Hope and Urban Ministries, to people we know or come across... So shame on that rich man! *Why-can’t-he-be-more-like-Jesus-and-by-that-we-mean- more-like-us.*

But what if Jesus really meant “all kinds of greed,” all kinds of advantage, and our desire for it? What if Jesus is talking about all the ways we work to maintain our privilege, often while rationalizing it, sometimes without even realizing it?

If we are paying attention, we can’t watch or read or hear the news without being confronted by the barns we have collectively built to store our benefits, the shelters we have constructed to protect our advantages rather than one another.

Some of us can’t drive down the road or shop in a store or walk in a neighborhood -- even our own -- or dress according to our core identities, whether religious or gender, or go to the bathroom without being confronted by massive obstacles of disadvantage.

Like the Israel God laments, according to the prophet Hosea, when we do not show reverence for one another, we do not show reverence for God. And God, according to the life of Jesus and the overarching message of the Bible, is particularly empathetic to the marginalized.

Yet we have created systems and raised structures to privilege those of us who are able-bodied, those of us who are not old -- but also not too young, those of us who are Christian, those of us who are male, those of us who are heterosexual, those of us whose gender identity matches our bodies and what others determine us to be, those of us who are middle-to-upper class, those of us who are white.

We have built silos -- physical silos, social silos, and economic silos -- accessible to some of us while becoming barriers to others.

Silos where those who are the standard, by which the rest of the human spectrum is judged, find protection and affirmation, while those outside fear not only being excluded, but being targeted and trapped.

Like the rich man, we have built silos to protect our privilege and have plans to build bigger ones to make sure they last.

And Jesus says to us, "Be on your guard against all kinds of advantage," and God says, "You fool!"

Because the parables, like the gospels they fill and reflect, like the God they reveal, come to break down our barns, our structures, our systems and definitions and norms... to turn our silos into sanctuaries... and us to the in-breaking kingdom of God...

the kingdom of God that subverts our orders and understandings, our logic and laws,

where Jesus says the last shall be first,

where what was considered least is cherished most, time and again,

where poor lives matter,

where differently-abled lives matter,

where trans* lives matter,

where Muslim lives matter,

where immigrant lives matter,

where Black Lives Matter.

In his words and his actions, Jesus is constantly comforting the afflicted and afflicting the comfortable.

If we are not joining him in transformative faith and work, if we are not bringing the kingdom nearer, we are limiting it and censoring the good news.

Sisters and brothers, may we not limit the parable and therefore the gospel,

may we not limit God and therefore our whole, collective, communal selves...

Because the God who draws us with human ties and cords of love, as the prophet says, calls us not to limit, but to rise,

not to *limit* mercy, but to **rise** in compassion,

not to *limit* the stranger, but to **rise** as neighbors,

not to *limit* forgiveness, but to **rise** in grace,

not to *limit* justice, but to **rise** in peace,

not to *limit* each other's voices, but to **rise** in solidarity,

not to *limit* hospitality, but to **rise** in hope,

not to *limit* the power of Love, but to **rise** in it... together.

May it be so.