

**What's it all for?**

A sermon by the Reverend Robert Bruce Edson in Emmanuel Episcopal Church, West Roxbury, Massachusetts, on the Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost, July 31, 2016.

*Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions. Luke 12:15*

I like to think that I live simply. I try to keep a neat and orderly home, yet it is so easy to allow too many things to accumulate and clutter a home. Many clergy have a fair size library of books. For me, my favorite books have been adventures in learning. I like to refer back to those that I have read. A good rule is that if I haven't read, worn or used something, there is no point in keeping it and I give it away what can be useful to others.

The author of Ecclesiastes, known as "the preacher," knew that we are acquisitive creatures. We need to learn to be satisfied with what we have. The preacher warns against a value system based on getting and keeping things, but there is something in the human psyche that always wants just a little more. Vanity, writes the preacher, all is vanity.

Jesus teaches us about the futility of a life spent in the pursuit of material things. It was common practice in ancient times for a rabbi to be asked to act as judge on issues of right conduct. When a man approaches Jesus in a crowd to ask him to settle a dispute with his brother over their inheritance, he refuses. He senses that the man is more concerned with his own greed than about a right judgment on inheritance laws. Disputes over inheritance of property can go on indefinitely at great cost. The Commandment against coveting is about not being envious of what others have. No good can come from attempts to gain the whole world at the price of our soul.

Jesus illustrates his point by telling a parable about a man who has prospered with an abundant harvest of crops. He thinks that if he puts his surplus on the market all at once, the price per unit will drop. He figures that it would be wiser to tear down his barns and build larger ones in which to store his grain until such time when the market demand is greater. This will assure him financial security and he can relax, eat, drink and be merry. Notice that it is all about him with his frequent use of "I" and "my." "I have no place to store my crops, I will build, and I will store my grain and my goods." He is consumed by his own wealth and gives no thought to sharing his bounty with those in need. When he dies, before he can begin construction on his new and larger barns, it's too late. His greed has eaten away at any awareness or compassion for those who go without.

Now, you may be thinking that we should be responsible for ourselves and not have to be dependent on others. There is nothing wrong in itself with living comfortably. There is nothing wrong with putting aside something for the future. Prudent financial planning is a responsible thing to do, but as we plan for our financial security, we must not forget to provide for those who are less fortunate and go without. No price can be set on the value of those who live on the margins. I have known those who spent years waiting for their inheritance only to find that they didn't get what they expected. Intense and ugly family disputes over the inheritance of money and property is likely to be fueled by past hurts and offenses. Oscar Wilde once observed that there are two tragedies in life. One is not getting what we want and the other is getting it. We must ask ourselves if we own our possessions or do they own us.

It is not about how much we have, but what we do with what we have. The "haves" and the "have-nots" cannot be stereotyped. There are generous people among the rich and the poor. There are those who have much as well as those who have little who are very miserly. Our values are reflected in what we are willing to share for the benefit of others.

Jesus teaches more on the right use of money and material things than any other subject. Sixteen of the thirty-eight parables are about wealth and material possessions. You might be surprised to know that there are 500 verses about prayer and faith in the Bible while over 2,000 verses are about the value and use of money and possessions. The lure of money and the quest for material things too easily block our spiritual outlook.

There is nothing wrong in itself with earning a living. There is nothing in itself wrong in having nice things. What is essential is to have the right attitude toward what we do with what we have. All we have is a gift from God and it is all the more essential to know how to use our gifts for the benefit of others. The world is better off for those who have given of what they have to make a difference in the lives of others.

Mature Christianity places high value on altruism and generosity and focuses on those in need. God uses those who have much to provide for those who have little or nothing. The Bible doesn't say that money is the root of evil. It says that the love of money is the root of evil. (1Timothy 6:10.) When money and possessions take precedence over God and our relationships, we become prisoners of our own compulsion for personal gain.

We are only passing through this world. It is a comparatively brief sojourn. The story is told of an American visiting in Poland in the home of a wise old rabbi. He is curious that the rabbi's home consists of only one room filled with books and little more than a table and bench. When he asks the rabbi where his furniture is, he replies, "Where is yours?" The visitor explains that he is only passing through. "So am I," said the rabbi.