

Well, the good news is that this is the final stewardship sermon you'll be hearing this year! You should have all received my letter and your pledge packets in the mail. And I hope you read it and are prayerfully considering your pledge to our church. Interestingly, this week, I received a letter in response, and I wanted to share it with you.

Dear Pastor Rebecca,

You know me and some of my very good friends, and we felt compelled to write you this letter. As you're well aware, we attend John Wesley faithfully every single Sunday, but in all honesty, we have contributed somewhat reluctantly.

You see, we find ourselves actually holding the rich landowner in today's parable in high regard, taking exception to Jesus calling him a 'fool.' Because if you think about it, isn't this a man that we really all admire? Let me tell you why. First, his wealth was honestly acquired. The Scripture clearly says that the man had a fertile farm that produced fine crops. Now a farm just doesn't produce good crops all by itself. One has to work the land. And one has to work hard. You should know what that takes Rebecca, because you come from a family of farmers. Don't you remember your grandfather telling you how he picked corn by hand when he first started, one ear at a time. Don't you remember your father leaving early in the morning and coming home well after dinner, well after dark. Yes, this landowner had to have worked very hard. And the reward for his hard work was his wealth. He did not become rich by means of speculation or oppression or dishonesty. He did not take his wealth from the pockets of others through illegal or unethical means. No one was made any poorer by his increasing riches. On the contrary, his land likely required many hired hands for its development, and was the means by which many others made their living, put a roof over their heads, and fed their families. So a whole community benefited through his land's abundance. And isn't that all good?

Second, the landowner was wise and thoughtful and prudent. He saved and prepared for emergencies and his retirement years by storing his grain in barns. He made careful provision for his earthly needs and his earthly security. Anything foolish in that? Don't we all try to do the same things today with our savings, our IRA's, our investments, our homes? So let's not condemn the landowner for these reasons.

¹ Excerpts from "The Teachings Of Jesus in Parables", George Hubbard

And finally, the landowner was competent and proactive. No sooner did he realize that he had a need for more storage, then he went into action and said, “I will do this. I will tear down my barns and I will build bigger ones for my crops.” He wasted no time. And wasn't he smart to make timely preparation for the coming harvest? He would have been foolish indeed if he waited until the harvest was upon him before acting. Those valuable crops could have been ruined if there was a lack of storage. So you see, Pastor Rebecca, my friends and I have always thought of the landowner as honest, hard- working, wise, competent and intelligent. In fact, given the importance of my friends and I, given our significance and status in the world, we extolled his virtues and extend to him our greatest esteem.

That is, until you explained to us why God said to him, “You fool!” “You fool!” And now we understand. Now you've changed our minds. Now we want to contribute more!

And so, if I might ask your permission, I would like to address my remaining remarks directly to your congregation. Dear good people of John Wesley, you know who we are, because my friends and I are really very close to you. How, you ask? Well, just look in your pockets and in your purses, and you'll see many of us right there. George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, Alexander Hamilton, Andrew Jackson. And we are there because we represent who and what you are. No matter your status, rich or poor, we represent your struggles, your hard work, your service, your success, and even some of your failures. And we are close to you because we are your security in this world. We are your safety. We are your storage barns. We represent all of your earthly needs and wants. We are the means to satisfy your desires – to take it easy, eat, drink and be merry. However, we are afraid there is the danger that you might become too much like the landowner. Caught up in making such careful provisions for the here and now, for your earthly needs, that you forget your eternal needs.

So let's look again at the landowner. He planned ahead to provide for the future. There's no foolishness in that, because the probability was, he would continue to go on living, perhaps even many more years. However, the certainty was that he would eventually die, leave this earth – and leave everything behind, including me and all my friends. Just like that is the same certainty for you. And he was called a fool, yes a fool, to make little or no provision for that certainty. You see it is wise to provide for the probable, but it is foolish to neglect the certain. Let me repeat that. It is wise to provide for the probable, but it is foolish to neglect the certain. The landowner was wise in what he'd done – investing in his earthly security. But he was foolish because of what he had not done – he had not invested in a rich relationship with God. And then he heard those words, “you will die this very night.” Now do you understand?

It's funny, but in two thousand years things haven't changed very much. Especially when it comes to our money and possessions. For did you notice how often the landowner used the words "I" and "my"? "What shall I do? I will tear down, I will build, I will store my crops, my grain, my goods. In fact, he even went so far as to claim, "my soul." He had actually fooled himself into thinking that he alone was responsible for all he had, and that he was the sole owner of all his possessions, and even his soul. He did not grasp the concept of stewardship – that all he had, that all you and I have, has been provided by God, and we are to use what we've been given – our money and our talents, not just to care for ourselves, but to care for the people and world he has created. Listen again to the landowner's words. "Soul, you have enough stored away for years to come. Now take it easy! Eat, drink, and be merry." But had he really laid up anything for his soul? Can the needs of a person's soul be stored in barns, or deposited in banks, or represented by vacations or houses or automobiles or any possession? I think you would agree that "no" is the answer. That's why God said to him: "You fool!" And that's why Jesus reminds us, "So it is with those who store up earthly wealth for themselves, but do not have a rich relationship with God."

That's why what you do with your money is not just an economic issue, it is a spiritual issue as well. Jesus said, "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal." And we build up our spiritual treasures when we are good stewards. When we take what God has given us and use it for God's work and purposes here on earth. To make a difference in His world.

And so, dear people of John Wesley, my friends and I have this challenge for you. Use us more. We challenge you to use us more to expand your children and youth programs so you can be a positive influence in a culture where God is rejected. We challenge you to use us more to find new ways, new places, to reach out so that more and more people might know the love and joy and peace and hope of Jesus Christ. We challenge you to use us more for the spiritual growth of this congregation, so that you can be strong in your faith, bold in your witness and equipped for the ministries to which to which God has called you. Use us more to make disciples for Jesus Christ. In this way, you will have a rich relationship with God, which will, in turn, bring you an abundance of blessings. Because just listen to these promises of Jesus: "Give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be poured into your lap; for the measure you give will be the measure you

get back.” “Seek first the kingdom of God, and all these things will be given to you.” “Truly I tell you there is no one who gives and sacrifices for the kingdom of God who will not get back very much more in this life, and in the eternal life to come.”

So John Wesleyans, my friends and I are hoping you really think about what we've said here today and then live by our motto, “In God We Trust.” "In God We Trust."

Sincerely,

George, Abe, Alex, & Andy

Well, I think George did a fine job. I couldn't have said it better myself. If you didn't receive a letter and pledge packet and would like one, the ushers will have it for you on your way out today. And I pray that you will think about how you can have a rich relationship with God, and think about how much you can give to God's work here at John Wesley. And for those of you who don't have a lot of wealth, and it is a struggle to pay your bills, I want to remind you again of the poor widow. All she could give was a penny. But Jesus praised her more than anyone else because she gave all she could and she gave out of love for God. Because remember Jesus' promise, “There is no one, no one, who gives and sacrifices, even a penny, for the kingdom of God who will not get back very much more in this life, and in the eternal life to come.” Amen!