

Family Reunion

Luke 12:13-21

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Jesus is asked to solve a Family dispute. It seems right to come to Jesus with family questions, yes?

During our vacation, Rachel and I did some family history. Families are filled with intrigue, with disputes that need solving, and with rifts that need smoothing out.

We toured Williamsburg and came upon the house of George Wythe. He was a respected law professor and judge. He freed the slaves he owned, including Lydia Broadnax and her son Michael. It was his housekeeper Lydia Broadnax who testified that Wythe's grandnephew, his sister's grandson whom Wythe had taken in, stirred poison into the Sunday morning coffee (May 25th, 1806). Michael died of arsenic poisoning a week later. Wythe, who suspected his wily grandnephew, wrote George Wythe Sweeney OUT of his will, and died a week after that. Lydia Broadnax survived. At Sweeney's murder trial, Broadnax's damning testimony against the nefarious Sweeney was not admitted into evidence. Why? Because Virginia Law at that time did not allow testimony from a black person to be entered into evidence against a white person. Back in 1806, when it came to the court system, **it was better to be white and guilty than black and innocent.** Hopefully, that's not still true; if were true, George Wythe would roll over in his grave.

We invite Jesus into our family, into the discussion, into our lives. "Come, Lord Jesus, be our guest/ And let these gifts to us be blest." *Come!*^[1]

Families have lots of problems. *Jesus, would you please help me sort out the family ties that have become knotted? That makes sense. We turn to you, O Lord, for clarity, for wisdom, for advice.*

Bob and Kristi Rice are part of our church family in South Sudan. They are our mission partners. They recently wrote:

This is a difficult season in South Sudan. Food insecurity has reached crisis levels and there continues to be attacks and insecurity in many regions. The United Nations is no longer providing food aid to people who have been displaced, except in new emergency cases. Inflation is high and the government is months behind in paying salaries for civil servants. Please pray that God gives wisdom, faith, and love to the church here, and enables leaders to minister to people who are suffering. We pray that God brings redemption, hope, and renewed unity out of this time of suffering.^[2]

Bob and Kristi remind us that our family around the globe are hurting and celebrating. *Come, Lord Jesus, we pray. Come to the Ukraine and bind up the wounds of the war torn and tattered. Come to Russia and demand peace from leaders there. Come to Cuba as the Luyano Presbyterian Church celebrates 100-years of doing ministry in Havana. Come to South Sudan and strengthen the work of reconciliation Bob and Kristi are working so hard to achieve.*

Come, Lord Jesus.

The Illinois Conferences of Churches met this week to discuss gun violence. Illinois has some of the toughest gun laws in the nation, and our numbers aren't as bad as most states. Nevertheless, guns are the leading cause of death in Illinois for children 1- to 17-years-old.

Come, Lord Jesus. Our family is hurting. Our family seeks your peace.

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It's not unusual that Jesus would be asked to intervene in a family dispute. What is odd is that Jesus seems to distance himself from the question.

"Someone in the crowd said to him, 'Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me.'¹⁴ But he said to him, 'Friend, who set me to be a judge or arbitrator over you?'"

It may seem at first that Jesus is reluctant to answer this man's question, reluctant to get involved.

A closer reading suggests that Jesus sees through the man's question to the man's greed. The man doesn't want to resolve a dispute with his brother. In fact, the man may not care a whit about his brother. The man cares only about his inheritance. *Hey, Jesus, I want what's mine. Tell my brother to give it to me.*

Jesus uses this moment to talk about greed, because it is greed that motivates the man in Jesus' parable. A man's land produced a bumper harvest. He needs to store his grain, so he pulls down his old, smaller barns and builds larger ones.

We might think this farmer has done nothing wrong, that he's only being a good steward of what God has entrusted to his care. Such is not the case; the words "my" and "I" come up eleven times in this text. Not once does this man mention his neighbor. Not one time does this man talk about how his bountiful harvest will help his community. He doesn't mention orphans, widows, the poor, the hungry, the disposed, or the sojourner. God has not entrusted bounty to us *only* for us. We are called to share, and this is Jesus' point.

"Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions."

Jesus is saying, I want to talk with you about your brother. But I don't want to talk about your father's money, except to say that money can get in the way of right relationships.

Paul would later say that money is not the root of all evil, but the *love of money* is, in fact, the root of all evil. Greed is a problem that clogs the moving gears of the family farm. Beware of greed. Don't think just about yourself. Think about your neighbors. Think about the less fortunate. Think about your place in the wider family, which includes the whole world. If you are stuck on yourself, you are plain stuck. You are in trouble. You are mocking what God has in mind for God's kin-dom, on earth as it is in heaven.

* * *

I was surrounded by family stories this week. This family parable comes to mind. It's an old folk tale.

Two brothers worked on the family farm and lived across a wide field from each other. They shared the farm's profits equally. The older brother had a wife and many children, and he felt that he should share with his younger brother who was single. *I have much grain and a family, so I should share my bounty.* So, every night the older brother would secretly carry a bag of grain from his storage bin and dump it into his brother's.

Meanwhile, the younger brother said to himself, *I don't have a family living under my roof. My brother's family needs more. I have more grain than my brother. I should share my grain.* So, every night the younger brother secretly carried a bag of grain from his storage bin to his brother's.

For years, both brothers were perplexed because their grain supply never dwindled.

One night, the brothers bumped into each other in the field. They fell together and their bags of grain spilled out. They realized what had been happening all along. They laughed. They embraced.

This is what Jesus has in mind about sharing our bounty. We are called to keep the welfare of our brothers and sisters always in mind. Greed is a windowless door, closed and locked. Generosity is an open door, an open heart, an attitude of inclusion and of welcome.

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I'll end with two more short family stories: My grandparents raised their five kids and Cousin Paulie at 68 Cherokee Road, a half-block from the harbor. Every evening dinner was a parable of generosity. Everyone was always welcome around their dinner table. My grandfather worked in the Shipyard and was not rich. They did not have an abundance of food. In those days, no one did. When the kids were called in for dinner, they could invite their friends if they wanted. And when a relative or neighbor stopped by late in the afternoon, they were invited to stay for dinner.

Chairs could be added to their small dining room table. And if necessary, a small table was set up in the kitchen for the children.

My father and his siblings knew two rules: (1) Everybody was welcome around that table, and (2) when they had unexpected guests, the family always served themselves *last and less* in order that their guests would have plenty—a superflurity.

"The remarkable thing about this hospitality," said my Aunt Alice, "was that it was so unremarkable. It was just an ordinary way of life."

Generosity.

And this final story: When my dad returned from the VA Hospital in Richmond after the war—after having been a POW in Germany, after having been nursed back to health first in a hospital near Paris, then in a VA hospital in NYC, then at McGuire VA in Richmond, he came home.

With his back pay, he bought his mother a brand new, single pedestal, dinner table for their dining room. It was large enough to fit all-comers.

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Jesus says generosity is a way of being rich toward God. Being rich toward God is sharing with others. We build barns to store our grain in order that we may more generously share our grain.

AMEN.

Luke 12:13-21 ¹³Someone in the crowd said to him, "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me." ¹⁴But he said to him, "Friend, who set me to be a judge or arbitrator over you?" ¹⁵And he said to them, "Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions." ¹⁶Then he told them a parable: "The land of a rich man produced abundantly. ¹⁷And he thought to himself, 'What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?' ¹⁸Then he

said, 'I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. ¹⁹And I will say to my soul, "Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry." ²⁰But God said to him, 'You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?' ²¹So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God."

[1] I've been listening to a lot of family stories these last few weeks. A cousin told me about a restaurant near her home. It's owned by two brothers who are alleged to have murdered their parents. The motto of their restaurant is, "We treat you like family." *Yikes.*

[2] Letter dated July 2022 to me.