Sunday, June 11, 1972
WHAT ABOUT YOU? (A sermon on the Parable of the rich fool)
Luke 12:13-21

The land of a rich man produced a surplus of grain. As we would expect, he was highly pleased with his growing wealth and with himself. He wondered, “what shall I do for I have nowhere to put all the surplus.” But it didn’t take him long to make a decision. He said to himself, “I’ 11 pull down my present storage facilities and build larger ones and then I’ll have room for all my wealth. I’ll have it all to myself, well protected. I’ll have security! And furthermore, then I’ll be able to say to myself, Soul you have ample goods laid up for many. years, you have real security, take your ease, eat, drink and be merry.”

In other words, the man told himself, “I’ve worked hard getting all of this wealth for myself. I deserve all that I have so I’ll just take it easier and enjoy all that I deserve.”

But said Jesus, God said to that man, “Fool, this night your soul is required of you; and the things you have pre-pared, whose will they be?” And then Jesus added, “So is he who piles up riches for himself but is not rich in God’s sight.”

In the Bible, this story by Jesus is usually given the title, “The Parable of the rich fool,” because in it, God calls the man a fool. Yet to many of us, the title might seem a contradiction in terms. How can a person be rich and be a fool at the same time, particularly if he has not inherited his wealth, but has made it for him- self? Often in our way of looking at things, we think of someone who has made a lot of money as being successful and therefore a wise person and not a fool.

But not so with God! In this story, Jesus said quite plainly that God called the man a fool. God did so, not simply because the man was rich and successful in worldly terms, but because of the attitude the rich man had toward his wealth, toward himself, and toward life in God’s world. In other words, we don’t have to be as wealthy as this man to also be a fool in God’s terms.

In what ways then was this man a fool? And how might we also be fools in like manner?

1. Note first that the man was a fool because he thought wisdom went with his worldly wealth and success. He reasoned, “since I have made a lot of money, then it also follows that I must be very wise, not only in money matters, but in all areas of life.” “I am so wise that I will plan out my life to the smallest detail. I will even decide how long I’m going to live. I am in control.”

Well, the parable says to us that we too are fools when we equate wisdom with success. One does not necessarily follow the other, contrary to much popular belief. We can learn a lot about ourselves and our philosophy of life by listening to the sayings or cliches we hear and use. We’ve all heard the saying — "You can’t argue with success.” That’s what the fool in the parable thought.

In this phrase we are often equating wisdom and success. So much is this often the case that we even hesitate to criticize success in any quarter. So much do we equate success and wisdom that we assume that any success achieved in any field makes a person an authority in all other fields.

Thus, a film star is paid for a testimonial about the virtues of a refrigerator; the athlete tells us about the kind of hair oil to use; the business tycoon speaks a final word about whiskey. _Doesn't it seem strange that the opinion or _taste of any of these people should be taken so seriously in so many places? Surely, it is naive to believe that because a person is a first-rate baseball player, he is to be regarded as an authority on > shaving. Or because a man has made millions in the oil business, he is an expert on politics or foreign policy.

Like the fool in the parable, we often assume that success in any field makes us wise in all things. Jesus was a wise man, but by most of our standards would not be judged a success, but a failure.

Furthermore, we make the mistake of thinking that if it is successful, it must be right. I guess that's the real reasoning behind the cliche, "you can't argue with success."

Recently, I overheard two young men talking, both salesmen. As they talked, one said to the other, "I couldn't do it, but Bill gets away with it. And after all, you can't argue with success."

But why can't we argue with success? It's the only thing worth arguing with. There is no need to argue with fail-ure. And failure doesn't. want to argue. But success is often brassy and argumentative, self-satisfied, and superior about itself. This was the problem with the fool in the parable.

So, this parable of Jesus says you can argue with success! In fact, that's exactly what the parable itself does. The person who won't argue with success has already been corrupted without knowing it. He accepts the world at face value. He thinks that things are what they seem to be and should remain that way.

I want to argue with the success of organized crime and the success of segregation. I want to argue with the suc-cess of all violence, fraud, greed, and inhumanity. I want to argue with our success to make newer and more efficient weapons of death while we permit many of our cities — places of life — to molder and decay.

There are all kinds of successes which we Christians are to argue with. In fact, the Bible is not a textbook of success in our usual way of thinking of success. Its wisdom comes from a captive and despised people. Jesus Christ was not so much a superstar in his own time, but a failure according to many of our most cherished stan-dards.

2. Secondly, the man in the parable was a fool, according to God, because he fell into the trap of thinking he de-served all that he had and more. Furthermore, he was a fool because he thought he had all by himself on his own power produced all that he had. He thought he was a self-made man, and that he needed no one else. This same kind of thinking is still all around us.

Recently, I heard of a young man who while working on his automobile, said to his father, "I don't owe the world a thing. I'm a free individual. I can do what I want. I can make a million dollars all by myself if I want to."

Ah, but this young man is as big a fool as the man in the parable. Like many of us, he has not taken a good look around him. All of us have a tremendous debt to the past and to others in the present. There really is no such thing as a self-made person.

Did that young man bring himself into the world? Did he cause himself to be born? Did he make the world into which he was born? Everything that young man enjoyed and that you and I enjoy doing is a free gift from the past. That young man's tools, his machinery, his clothes, in-deed his health itself. All were invented or developed' or fortified by his ancestors. If he hadn't been fed and clothed while a baby, he would've not lived long. That young man, the fool in the parable, and we too would be like beasts in the forest if not for better persons than we; unclad, unshod, ravaged by disease, riddled with misery.

None of us contributes more than one millionth of one per-cent to the accumulated knowledge and comfort we call civilization. The farmer inherits his tools from the wis-dom of the past, the manufacturer depends upon the kind of brains that were more interested in progress than pro-fit. The schoolgirl benefits from untold hours of research and devotion.

The whole world is a gigantic legacy. Imagine having to start afresh each generation. Who would invent the wheel, devise the lever, construct the alphabet and multiplication tables? I could not! Could you? We were born into a world where most of the basic elements were already waiting for us; we merely combine them and rearrange them for our own pleasure or profit, and we do not even do that all alone.

We are inter-dependent! We cannot get along in this world without others. The producer needs the consumer, and the consumer needs the producer. Management needs labor and labor needs management. In the age of auto-mation where we now are, this becomes all the more import-ant to remember. We can have completely automatic fac-tories and farms, but at the same time we also have to have people working, making money so that they can purchase the products which are produced and manufactured. Otherwise, the automatic factories will have to shut down.

Not long ago, I heard of a proud manager of a factory who was showing a person through his completely automated facility which made automobiles. But the visitor asked, "Are the machines going to buy the cars you are making?"

So there really is no such thing as a self-made person. If I want to start my own business with my own invention and get rich and become famous, I cannot do it unless there is someone to buy my product, someone to help me produce it, others to help me sell it. And the invention itself will be built upon the work of others who have gone before me.

The man in the parable was a fool because he thought his wealth was entirely due to his own power and ingenuity. However, the parable itself correctly begins, "The land of a rich man brought forth plentifully!" The land! Did he make the land? Did he cause the sun to shine or the rain to fall? He brought nothing into this world, and he would take nothing from it.

We all draw our strength from many sources rather than just our own power. The attempt to be self-sufficient is in vain, for the necessities by which we live are not humanly produced. They are from God and when we fail to recognize this or cut ourselves off from the source, we are £oo1s!

3. Thirdly the man in the parable was a fool because he failed to reckon with his own death. He simply failed to· take into account the fact that one day like all the rest of us he would die.

There comes a time in each human being's life, when as the parable puts it, our soul is required of us. The one inevitable fact of our life is our death. Thus, Jesus told a great number

of stories about being ready. Jesus didn't say that we are to be continually preoccupied with the fact of our death, but simply that we are always to take that fact into account. It is a humbling thought.

We are not in ultimate control of our lives. We did not bring ourselves into the world. We do not really own the world or any part of it. We are not the master of our fate. God is in control, and we are ultimately responsible to him, and through him to others.

Once we have taken our total life and death into account, we can come to feel a new sense of freedom. We need no longer be slaves as was the rich fool to the things of the world. What were once falsely life and death matters will not be so any 1onger.

A few years ago, a man called me one day and asked that I come to see him. I had always known the person to be strong and vigorous. He was about 45 years old. As we talked in his home, he told me that he had just been told by his doctor that he had an incurable disease and that within several years he would lose completely all control of his muscles and then die.

We agreed to meet together at least once a week from then on to talk about life and death. This we did with some interruptions for almost four years while he slowly died as the disease progressed. During the last few months, he could no longer talk so we had to work out an elaborate signal system. But during the total time, we talked openly and frankly about his coming death. It was an experience I shall never forget. During that time, his whole outlook on life changed and he became rich toward God. Few of us however have that long a time to prepare for our death and yet in a deeper sense we have all of our lives to become rich toward God. Amen.