Sunday, September 21, 1986
REVISING THE FUTURE
Luke 12:13-21; Revelation 21:1-5

In the passage just read from the Gospel according to Luke, Jesus tells a story about a man who was rich and at the same time Jesus called him a fool! To some people in our society, this sounds like a contradiction in terms, for they assume that if a person is rich, he or she cannot be a fool. But not so according to Jesus.

The man Jesus described was not only rich, but he was also successful according to the way in which we usually define success. He ran a successful farming operation — one that produced huge profits, so much so that he was making more money than he could spend. So he was both successful and rich, and these two do not always go together. Some people become rich through inheritance, or maybe win a several million-dollar lottery, or are lucky in some other way.

So the first point that Jesus makes in this parable is that wisdom does not always go with success or with being rich. This challenges a widely held assumption. In our time in particular, the definition of success usually includes making a lot of money, and if someone can make a lot of money, we go on to assume that he or she is filled with wisdom. Furthermore, it is the conviction of many that you cannot argue with success, and you have no right to criticize it, but Jesus tells us that you can be rich, and you can be successful, and you can still be a fool!

Isn't it amazing how we assume that any success achieved in any field makes that person an authority in all other fields? I have just finished reading a new biography of the Ford family and the automobile industry. It's entitled, "Ford, The Men, and The Machines." Because Henry Ford I was eminently successful in the manufacture of automobiles, particularly with his design and production of the Model T Ford, he began to assume that he was an authority in every other field of endeavor. And not only did he assume that, but many other people assumed it as well.

The assumption is still with us; success in any field carries great powers of persuasion in all fields. That's why commercials use film stars to sell refrigerators and star athletes to endorse hair oil or shaving cream. It's still a widely held assumption that if a person is in the top financial bracket, his or her message is thereby authenticated, and no one has a right to question it. If it is successful, it must be right. However, Jesus, in this parable, challenges this popular assumption.

A second assumption which this parable challenges is that the future will simply be an extension of what is going on in the present. That's why Jesus called the rich man in the parable — a fool. He assumed that since he was making a lot of money now that he would always continue to do so. He assumed that he was in complete control of his destiny — he even forgot that one day he would die. The only future he could imagine was that of a continuation of the present. There was no thought of revising the future. He assumed the present trend would continue forever.

Many of us today still fall into this conceptual trap — that's why nothing fails like success. We refuse to allow for the fact that the future is always being revised and that it is always open to change and therefore to a certain degree unpredictable.

Someone said that when it comes to the future, there are three sorts of people — (1) those who let it happen; (2) those who help make it happen; (3) those who wonder what happened. Some people "let it happen," not because of indifference or ignorance, but rather because they are almost too well informed. They understand the extraordinary complexity of the issues and they see the disturbing gap between the enormity of the task and the inadequacy of the present response. As a result, they feel powerless to make any sort of difference at all.

Several years ago, I attended a conference in which we tried to look at the future. Our first assignment was for each one of us individually to list five events or trends or changes each of us thought would be likely to occur in the future in general — not the long, long, range future, but within our lifetime. Then each one of us was asked to make a second list of five things we thought would likely happen to us personally in the future.

Try this exercise sometime. It's quite revealing. In a group of about twenty of us who did the exercise, only several of us on our personal list put down the fact that we would die. Now maybe some people who are making their lists felt that to write this down as something that would happen to them in the future was too obvious — but I don't think so. A lot of people don't take into account the fact that one day they will die. The man in the parable that Jesus told didn't take his own death into account. Jesus wasn't saying that we should dwell on the fact that we are one day going to die, but we at least ought to take it into account as we think about the present and the future.

This parable then calls into question two popular assumptions—(1) that wisdom, riches, and success are always related; and (2) that present trends will continue into the future.

In their place, this parable gives us two new assumptions that we as Christians can make about the future and what effect will these assumptions have on us as we live in the present.

First of all, Jesus tells us through this parable, and in other places as well, that the future is always undergoing revision. It is not pre-determined. The only thing that is pre-determined is that one day each one of us will die. To say that the future is not pre-determined is another way of saying that the future is open and if it is open, then we can have some effect on it if we see ourselves as part of that group who believe that we can. Remember earlier I said that in regard to the future there are three sorts of people — those who simply let it happen; those who help make it happen; and those who wonder what happened.
God has so made the world that we can have some effect on our future and the world's future. We can help make the future happen. We can be part of revising the future. Buckminster Fuller described it this way in a metaphor. He said we are all passengers on a spaceship, the Earth, for which no operating manual has been written. We are not simply going to find that manual somewhere; it's our task to write it, and we had better figure out where we're going and how to make our spacecraft work.

As Christians, we believe that we have been given a lot of help and will continue to receive guidance and help from God's Spirit. That's why we continue to study the Bible — but not as an answer book, but as a living guide for helping us, both as individuals and as we work together to make this a better world and a better future.

Secondly, not only do we as Christians assume that the future is open and therefore always undergoing revision and that we can have some part therefore in determining the future, for good or ill, we also assume that God is at work and as the Bible puts it — God is always making all things new. Because God is at work still creating and because God is a loving God

and because God works with us and in us — life is filled with new beginnings, change is inevitable.
This is one of the most difficult facts that we human beings have to deal with. Again, like the rich fool in the parable, we tend to deny change — we tend to think that what is happening now is always going to happen. We get caught in that conceptual trap. It occurs in all areas of our living. Mark Twain once said that if the only tool you have is a hammer, you tend to see all problems as nails.

Or to change the metaphor for our time — if the only tool you have is a gun, then you tend to see all problems as something to be killed, and that will then solve the problem. We still tend to fall into the conceptual trap that force or power will solve all our problems.

How do we get caught in conceptual traps? A psychologist named Edward De Bono has studied how the mind forms (and resists) new ideas. He compares the process of thinking to digging holes and uses this example: “It is not possible to dig a hole in a different place by digging the same hole deeper. Logic is the tool that is used to dig deeper holes, but if a hole is in the wrong place, then no amount of improvement is going to put it in the right place. No matter how obvious this may seem to every digger, it is still easier to go on digging in the same hole than to start all over again in a new place.”

This disinclination to abandon a half-dug hole is partly a reluctance to abandon the investment of effort that has gone into the hole without seeing some return. It is also easier to go on doing the same thing rather than wondering what else to do: there is a strong commitment to it. Henry Ford had trouble changing from the Model T.

It is not possible to look in a different direction by looking harder in the same direction. No sooner are two thoughts strung together than there is a direction, and it becomes easier to string further thoughts along in the same direction than to ignore it. Ignoring something can be hard work, especially if there is not yet an alternative.

For example, by far the greatest amount of scientific effort is directed towards the logical enlargement of some accepted hole. Yet great new ideas and great scientific advances have often come about through people ignoring the hole that is in progress and starting a new one. This starting of a new hole is rare because the process of education is usually effective, and education is designed to make people appreciate the holes that have been dug for them by their betters. Also, there is a comfortable, earned familiarity with a well-worked hole. We have to have the courage to dig new holes, which means asking new questions.

One of the most effective medical discoveries of all time came about when Edward Jenner shifted his attention from why people got smallpox to why dairymaids apparently did not. From the discovery that harmless cowpox gave protection against deadly smallpox came vaccination and the end of smallpox as a scourge in the Western world.

In one of Sherlock Holmes’ cases, his assistant, Dr. Watson, pointed out that a certain dog was of no importance to the case because it did not appear to have done anything. Sherlock Holmes took the opposite point of view and maintained that the fact that the dog had done nothing was of the utmost significance, for it should have been expected to do something, and on this basis, he solved the case.

The point is — as Christians, as followers of Jesus Christ, we should not be afraid of the new, afraid of change, afraid of asking new questions. God is always making things new — that's the testimony of the Bible — the future is continually being revised.

Walt Brueggemann, an old friend of mine and an Old Testament scholar, speaks of the difference between royal consciousness and prophetic imagination in the Old Testament. This is the contrast between traditional gods of order revered in ancient Egypt and the creative freedom of God celebrated by Moses or Jeremiah, and in the New Testament by Jesus. Royal consciousness emphasizes continuity and security, encouraging people to live as if the present structures of society would last forever. It insists on doing things as they've always been done. Secure in its power and affluence, it is marked by myopic vision and a mood of lethargy.

By contrast, prophetic consciousness challenges the old regime so that a new reality can emerge. It stresses justice over order. It speaks the language of poetry and lyric, seeking new metaphors for dying and living, as over against the deadening prose of the architects of royal society.

What worries me sometimes is that even though professing to be Christians and believers in the one living God, we worship the traditional gods of Egypt. We are bound to the oppressive and unimaginative gods of empire. If this be the case, then we are in danger of being like the rich fool in the parable Jesus told. And we will die without ever knowing the true joy of living! Think of what fun that rich man could've had giving his money away while he was still alive, but he thought he could keep it all for himself. That's why Jesus called him a fool!

Do not be afraid. God continually calls us to a revised future. Life is filled with new beginnings, and we can help those new beginnings to happen. That's the good news of the Gospel. Amen.