Sunday, August 11, 1991
POSTPONING WHAT'S MOST IMPORTANT
Luke 12:13-21

It was the summer of 1955, 36 years ago, and yet I can remember it almost as if it were yesterday. My wife and I were living in West Haven, Connecticut, and I had completed my second year of seminary at Yale. We had been married for nine months. I was a part-time Assistant Minister at First Congregational Church in West Haven and had another 40-hour-a-week job in a soft drink bottling plant on the assembly line.

The long-distance phone call came on a Sunday afternoon from my parents in Union, Missouri, halfway across the country. My little brother, named Kermit, ten years old, and the youngest of seven children, had been diagnosed with a brain tumor, and surgery was to take place on Monday morning. The prognosis was not good, and my parents wanted all of us to be there together. Could we come? It might be our last chance to see him alive. We quickly made airline reservations to fly from LaGuardia in New York City to St. Louis. The surgery would be in a hospital there.

We had no money for airline tickets, and Mastercard and Visa had not yet been invented. My dad said he would send the cash by Western Union. After getting the money at the local Western Union office, some friends drove us to LaGuardia. There were no non-stop flights from New York to St. Louis in 1955, and it was the first airplane trip for both of us. The plane was a DC-3, and it made stops in Washington D.C., Indianapolis, and then St. Louis. We arrived at about 3:00 a.m., and the surgery was scheduled for 8:00 a.m. After a few hours of fitful sleep, we gathered with the rest of the family at St. Joseph's Hospital at my brother's bedside. We were able to have a brief visit with him before he entered the operating room.

Following four hours of exploratory surgery, the surgeon reported to us the bad news that the tumor was unreachable, malignant, and nothing more could be done. My little brother remained in a semi-coma, followed by a deep coma for 18 weeks, and then died. During those 18 weeks, we took turns in twelve-hour shifts so that two of us were always at his bedside.

Why do I tell you this story? Because death is an unforgettable teacher. During those 18 weeks and for many months following, I and the rest of my family members could think of little else. Many of you have had a similar experience. Someone you love has recently died, and let's say you are with a group of people in a social setting. Someone is complaining about his child being impossible to handle. Another person talks about real estate taxes being too high and still going higher. Another voice talks about how crowded the highways are. You find yourself being annoyed at the small concerns that loom so large in the conversation of these friends. How could they possibly think that any of this really matters?

Death is a teacher. Facing the death of someone you love, or your own death, can add instant perspective to our lives. It helps us to sort out what is important and what is not.

The smaller problems that so frequently fill our thoughts seem to fade away in the presence of terminal illness and death. It is then that we begin to notice what is important in this life and what is not. Taking our own death into account and the death of the people we love can be a powerful teacher if we let it.

Jesus told a story about a man who had not let death be a teacher to him. In fact, he never considered that one day he would die. In the story, the man was rich, and he was very successful in the way in which our world usually defines success. He was so successful that he had to build bigger barns to hold all of his wealth. Yet Jesus called him a fool. For many of us in our time, this sounds like a contradiction in terms, for we assume that if a person is successful and therefore rich, he or she cannot be a fool. But not so, according to Jesus. Wisdom is not automatically connected with being successful or rich. And isn't it amazing how our culture assumes that any success achieved in any field automatically makes that individual not only a wise person but also an authority with wisdom in many other fields as well? Michael Jordan is a talented, skillful, and very successful professional basketball player, and as a result, he is now being paid for more product endorsements than any other professional athlete. But why should we, as prospective buyers, purchase some product simply because he's been paid a handsome fee to endorse it? It doesn't make any sense.

But let's return to the story Jesus told about the rich and successful man that he called in the end a "fool."

A minister friend of mine said that he could imagine what it would be like to make a call on the widow of the man in Jesus' parable of the rich fool. I know what he was talking about because I've made such calls. The husband has suddenly died. His wife is in shock. She wonders what to do next. She and her husband had not talked about death. They avoided that subject.

As we begin to talk about the funeral service, I ask some questions about her husband. "What was important to him?" She tells me that his family was very important to him. He was proud of his children, although she is not sure they knew that. He spoke of them often. He carried their pictures with him. But he was so busy in his work that he never had time to spend with them. His church was important to him, although she admitted that there was not much evidence of that in recent years — again because there were so many other things that took his time. He didn't stop believing in God, but somehow his life was so busy.

"How did he spend his time?" His wife tells me that all of his time was spent running his large farm. And he was very successful. Each year the crops were bigger, and he had to build larger barns to store all of his wealth. He couldn't seem to stop wanting more and more. He never wanted to give any of his money away. He couldn't let anything go. He wanted to hold on to everything he had as if it belonged to him and to him only.

So the other parts of his life were always on hold. His wife said that she would frequently ask him when it would all end so they could get on with their lives, and he would always try to reassure her with words like "tomorrow" or "soon" or "when we have enough money stored up." Then we could someday retire and say to ourselves, "Now we have plenty of money, so we can eat, drink, and be merry, and do all those things we've so often talked about." "But then he died. Now what am I supposed to do with all of these things?"

Death is a teacher, and among the things it can teach us is that we often give the right answers with words to the questions of what's most important in this life, but our actions say something quite different. And for the rich fool, the teaching came too late. And that's one reason Jesus called him a "fool."

This past spring, the Associated Press reported the results of a survey in this country that was conducted by Princeton Research Associates. The poll asked people to comparatively rank the importance of various concerns in their lives. The results were amazing. Forty percent said

faith in God was the most important thing in their lives; 29% said good health was number one; a happy marriage was the choice of 21%. Only 5% said that an enjoyable job was most important, and only 2% a job that pays well.

These results paint a rosy picture. Faith in God is the most important. But do the actions of people support this? Good health is the next most important? A happy marriage is the third most important? Do our actions support these statements? What's wrong with this picture? As an article in the Wall Street Journal pointed out last week, if faith in God is supposedly the most important thing to us Americans, a quick check of our checkbooks should bear this out. Yet the most recent studies show that people who make between $50,000 and $75,000 per year give only an average of 1.5% of their incomes to charity, religious or otherwise. Another study showed that while disposable income increased 103% from 1968 to 1985, giving to churches increased only 2%. Meanwhile, the leisure industry takes up 12% of the average American's income. Is faith in God really the most important?

Or if faith in God is really the most important thing in our lives, then it should make some difference in our behavior. Yet according to the same article in the Wall Street Journal, the latest research measuring the impact of faith in God on our day-to-day behavior at work seems to have little or no effect. Comparing those who claimed to have faith in God with those who had no faith in God on a wide range of behaviors like pilfering supplies (stealing), overstating qualifications on resumes (lying), calling in sick when not sick (lying and stealing), and overstating tax deductions (lying, stealing, and cheating), there was little difference in ethical behavior. So if faith in God makes no difference in how we spend our money, and if it makes no difference in our ethical behavior on the job, then how important can it really be? Maybe like the rich fool in the parable, we intend to have faith in God in the future. We intend to change our values in the future. We intend to do a lot of things.

The rich fool really believed that he intended to live a different life someday in the future. We know how it is. We say some of the same things. Someday I will take more time for my family. Someday I will be more generous in my giving, but first I have to be sure that I have more than enough for myself. Someday I will take more time to truly enjoy and appreciate God's creation. Someday I will read all those books I've always wanted to read. Someday I will deepen my spiritual life. But first I have to build bigger barns. I have heard and continue to hear so many people speak of how their lives are going to change as soon as their new and bigger barns are built...when they retire, when the children are grown, when the semester is over, when the task is complete, and when the work is done.

Isn't it amazing how the most important things in life are also the most easily postponed? Think about that. The most important things in life are the most easily postponed. No wonder Jesus called the man in this parable a fool.

He forgot that every moment is a precious gift, an opportunity to use as best we can. Just suppose for a moment that each one of us lived in this way, always conscious of the fact that we are dying and that tonight could be our last on earth. How different our lives might be. Maybe we would be more kind and loving to one another, always aware that this might be our last time together.

Rather we prefer to believe that there will always be another chance to say, "I love you," or "I'm sorry." We live our lives as though there will always be another tomorrow in which to send that friend a card, give the church that gift, or take a flower to someone we love.

Death can be a powerful teacher if we allow it. We can let it teach us what is truly important in this life. And more than that, it can teach us not to postpone the most important things in life. It is my hope for all of us that on that day when our souls are required of us, we will discover that we did not build all the barns we could have, but with God's help, we did build an abundant life. Amen.