Sunday, August 2, 1998
BALANCE AND PERSPECTIVE
Luke 12:13-21

No doubt you've had the experience of buying one or more new tires for your automobile. When the new tire is mounted onto the wheel, and before it is put back on the car, it's important to have the wheel balanced. When a wheel is out of balance on a car or other vehicle, the wheel will vibrate excessively, and the tire will wear unevenly, especially when traveling at higher speeds.

An unbalanced life, like an unbalanced wheel, will also have more stress. People with unbalanced lives tend to have more illness and wear out more quickly. In addition, they have less joy in life.

What causes a life to become unbalanced? The simple answer is "limited perspective." One day, a man asked Jesus to settle a dispute. This man and his brother were fighting over the family inheritance. Jesus could see greed at work. He could see lives that were out of balance because of their limited perspective.

Instead of settling the dispute, he told a story about a rich man whose life was out of balance because he had a very limited perspective on the purpose of life. This man was very prosperous and almost wore himself out by patting himself on the back for his skill in getting rich. He then decided that the only thing to do was to get richer and build bigger barns to store all of his wealth.

Bigger barns remind me of bigger houses, bigger cars, and bigger bank accounts. There's nothing intrinsically bad about bigger, although Jesus wants to remind us that bigger is not necessarily better.

In the story, God calls this rich man a fool. He was a fool for three reasons. First, because he took all the credit for getting richer and richer. He forgot what it says in the Old Testament: "Beware lest you say in your heart, 'My power and the might of my hand have gotten me all this wealth.' You shall remember the Lord your God, who gives you the power to get wealth." Second, he was a fool because he was so stingy and thought he deserved it all and could keep it all for himself. All he needed was more room to store his wealth. Third, he was a fool because he didn't take into account the fact that one day he would die.

According to the story, God said to this rich man, "Fool, tonight you are going to die, and then who is going to get all this wealth?" This man's life was out of balance because he had a limited perspective.

Balance and perspective — how are these two related? First, let's look more closely at what it means to have the proper perspective in life. If you are an artist and can paint pictures with perspective, it means the objects you have put on the canvas seem to have distance and depth, even though they are on a flat surface.

To have a good perspective on life means that you understand the various parts of life in relationship to each other and to life as a whole. You have a good idea of the relative importance of things. You have a sense of the various dimensions of life.

Here's a personal illustration. One of the first things I do when I visit a church building is to try to see it from a number of different perspectives. I remember the first time I visited this building about 28 years ago. I first sat down in one of the pews near the center. Then I walked up here into the chancel and into the pulpit. How did it appear from this position? Then I went to the balcony, and that gave me a totally different perspective. I also wanted to see how I felt when I entered the building through the main front doors. That would be the perspective of a person coming to this church for the first time. I was impressed.

Perhaps you remember your first flight in an airplane. I vividly remember mine. It was 43 years ago. That gave me a different perspective from which to view the earth. When you look out the window of an airplane, you begin to see how things fit together — how the hills and valleys interlock, how the fields form a mosaic, and how the towns and cities have shape and definition. The many people who have now had the opportunity to travel farther out in space have all commented on what a life-changing experience it is to view the planet earth from that perspective.

When you are able to see things from different perspectives, you notice how they are related to one another. You see things you hadn't noticed before.

Perspective not only comes from seeing things from different vantage points but also from other life experiences. One of the gifts of longer living can be an increased perspective. At age 15 or 18 or 20, your perspective is limited simply because you have not lived very long. When you're young and most of your life is ahead of you, the fact that you will one day die is rarely taken into account. As you grow and mature, your perspective on life and its meaning usually changes, but it does not automatically change for the better.

I know people who were stingy and greedy when they were young, and the longer they lived, the more stingy and greedy they became.

Severe illness can change your perspective. When your physician tells you that you have but a year or less to live because of heart disease or cancer, your whole perspective on life and what's important — your priorities — everything is seen from a different perspective.

One of the major gifts of the Christian faith is that it puts life in the proper perspective and, therefore, brings life into balance.

According to our faith, life on this earth is meant to be good because God made it that way. It is to be savored and appreciated. When we love God and each other, life's goodness expands. However, if we understand the purpose of life as that of accumulating more and more for ourselves like the rich fool in the story Jesus told, then we are living with a limited perspective, and our life gets out of balance. It can even throw other people's lives out of balance.

Some church people make the opposite mistake by putting all their emphasis on life after this life. Their perspective is that life in this world, the "here and now," is unimportant, so they don't worry about people suffering as long as it personally does not affect them. They forget that every minute, every hour, every breath is a gift of God, and it is to be lived in relationship with others. What Jesus called "eternal life" begins with the here and now.

A balanced life, then, is one that is lived with the perspective that life now is precious and important, even though it is transitional. The rich fool's life was out of balance because all he

worried about was getting enough wealth and having a place to store it so that sometime in the future he could relax and enjoy life. He kept building barns and postponing life.

I've made pastoral funeral calls on widows of men like the rich man in this story Jesus told. The wife doesn't know what to do next. Sometimes I haven't known very much about the man who died. I may have met him from time to time. I saw him in church at weddings and funerals. I knew he was very successful in his business. But at his funeral service, I'm expected to say some things about him as a human being.

So I ask the family members, "What memories do you have? What was important to him?" They tell me that he loved his wife. He was faithful, and they were married for 44 years.

He was proud of his children and his one granddaughter. They tell me they are sure that he believed in God. I ask, "How did he spend most of his time?" They tell me, "Working at his business. His sales were up again last year. He was planning to expand the business even further. As for other parts of his life, they were put on hold for the time being.

When we would ask him when it would all end and we could get on with our lives, he would always try to reassure us. He frequently used words like 'tomorrow' or 'soon.'"

I believe people when they tell me they intend to live a different life someday soon, just as I believe myself when I say it.

And yet, isn't it strange that the most important things in life are also the most easily postponed? A friend of mine said, "It may be a good idea to save money for a rainy day, but we sometimes act as if we are saving our lives for a rainy day."

How, then, does one gain the proper perspective so as to better live a balanced life? Our Christian faith gives several guidelines.

The first guideline is to remember the rhythm of life. From the beginning of human history, we human beings have been aware of a rhythm in all of creation. To be in rhythm is to be in the flow of life. It is to pace oneself as a long-distance runner paces himself or herself — not to go too slow or too fast. To have rhythm in life is to know when to work and when to rest, when to go forward and when to stop.

All of life has a rhythmical quality. There are seasons of the year, and there is the motion of the planets and stars. Rhythms are built into every organ of the body. Some illnesses can be described as part of our body being out of rhythm with other parts — the body not functioning in harmony within itself.

Of all human rhythms, the most basic are breathing and the beating heart. The heart muscle is the most remarkable kind of living tissue that exists. Somewhere within the structure of each individual fiber is contained a mysterious power to contract and relax in a self-generated rhythm. When the heart gets out of rhythm, then we are in trouble, and life goes out of balance.

Our Christian faith teaches us that all of life is to have a certain rhythm. The 4th commandment of the Ten Commandments puts the need for rhythm in life in religious terms: "Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the 7th is the Sabbath to the Lord your God."

No ancient society before the Jews had a day of rest. It is one of their gifts to us, and Jesus was all for it. Life is to be lived in a certain rhythm. The rich fool in the parable Jesus told had no rhythm to his life. It was all work. Once he had enough wealth accumulated, then he told himself he would take time off.

The second guideline from our Christian faith, which helps give us the perspective to live a balanced life, is relinquishment. It is the art of "letting go." Most of what we are taught in life is how to get things and how to hold onto things. Thus, many of us are much better and more skillful in acquisition than we are in letting things go or giving things away. Jesus said that if one wants to find his or her life, you also have to lose it, let it go, give it away.

Relinquishment, letting go, means also not giving eternal value to the things we own, the people we know, the plans we have, and the successes and failures we collect. All things go away. Nothing is eternal except God. That's why Jesus said, "Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal. But lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also."

Relinquishment means taking into account that one day each one of us will die. We brought nothing into this world, and we will take nothing with us.

The rich fool could not imagine that he would ever have to let anything go. He knew nothing about relinquishment, and therefore his life was out of balance. A balanced life is one in which there is both receiving and giving.

There's one more guideline from our faith which is necessary to follow in order to live a balanced life. As we grow and mature, it is necessary for us to be continually reassessing our perspective, our values, and our goals.

Some time ago, I did a sermon with the title, "Destination Check," and I noted that we need to check from time to time if we are headed toward the right destination in life. It's easy to get off track in life, to be headed toward the wrong destination without being aware of it. I now have a compass in my car, and it's very helpful. Earlier this summer, my wife and I were returning to Lincoln from a brief trip to Minnesota. It was a very cloudy day, and so the sun was not visible. After we had come through a very complicated interchange where several interstate highways intersected, I glanced at the compass and noticed we were going east, and we were supposed to be going west. At the next interchange, I was able to rectify my misdirection.

Life is like that. It's so easy to travel in the wrong direction and not notice until it's too late. That's what happened to the rich fool in the story Jesus told.

Rhythm, relinquishment, reassessment — all are necessary to maintain the right perspective and keep our lives in balance. They can keep us from postponing the most important things in life.

It is my hope for you and for me that on the day our soul is 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.