

Streetsville United Church
Sunday, October 10, 2010
Rev. John Tapscott

"THE RICHNESS OF GOD"

Luke 12:21

We know that it's important to have an up-to-date will. If you've ever known someone who died without a will, you know that the process of getting things straightened out is lengthy and expensive. I knew a man who died with his will unsigned, and instead of his considerable estate going to a long-time companion as he intended, it went to very distant relatives.

Now having a will is good but it's no guarantee that everything will go smoothly after one dies. A 6th grade teacher gave a problem to her math class: "A wealthy man dies and leaves ten million dollars. In his will, one-fifth goes to his wife, one-fifth to his son, one-eighth to his butler, and the rest to charity. Now, what does each get?" Quickly, Joey raised his hand. "Yes, Joey," she asked. With complete sincerity in his voice, Joey answered, "A lawyer!" Sometimes that happens.

One day a man said to Jesus, "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me." Now the law said that the elder son received 2/3rds of the estate and the younger son 1/3. It doesn't seem fair, but perhaps it was thought that the eldest son bore responsibility for the family. But maybe in this case, it had been reversed. The man who came to Jesus was likely the younger son. Perhaps he had stayed home to look after aging parents and took care of the farm, while the older brother went off and pursued a career. Perhaps he thought it should be divided 50/50 which is implied by his question. We don't know. But whatever it was Jesus refused to act as a judge or an arbitrator. The law would stand.

But in the request Jesus detected that the man was coveting his brother's share. So Jesus said, "Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of covetousness; for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions." Jesus went on to tell a parable about a rich farmer whose land produced abundantly. His crops were so great that he decided to build bigger barns to hold his grain and his goods. He said to his soul, "Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry." But God suddenly intervened, and said, "You fool. This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?" Jesus said, "So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God." (Luke 12:21)

This is Thanksgiving Sunday. And surely being rich toward God means lifting up our hearts to God in praise and thanks. For God is rich towards us. God is very rich towards us, his people.

But sometimes the feeling of gratitude burns low in us. It's understandable if you are going through a rough time and see no light at the end of the tunnel. But I think that what stifles gratitude within us even more is coveting. So often we look in the wrong direction. Rather than looking up and considering how richly God has blessed you, you look sideways and see what others have. You see someone who has more money, or a more impressive career, or an easier life or more successful kids, and you think, "I've worked as hard and been as good, why has God shortchanged me?" Rather than feeling a sense of gratitude towards God, you actually begin to resent him. Covetousness is a gratitude killer.

Now your neighbour's life may not quite be what it seems. A recent article headline read, "Don't be envious of your neighbour's Caribbean vacation. They probably can't afford it, either." And if you really knew the problems and burdens others secretly bear, you might not be so envious of their lives. God tells us in one of the Commandments, "Don't covet your neighbour's house or spouse or anything else belonging to your neighbour." Coveting is futile and its wrong but we do it anyway. It's almost hard-wired into us.

A school teacher in Britain tried an experiment. She gave each of ten children in a classroom a different toy, left them alone and quietly videotaped their behavior for fifteen minutes. Within sixty seconds, two children were grabbing the others' toys, while a third child collected the toys two had laid aside. At the end of fifteen minutes, three children were in possession of two toys each; three had none; two had different toys from the ones with which they started; and two were huddled in corners fearfully clutching the toys they had been given. And are adults much different?

James tells us in his letter, "You covet something and you cannot obtain it; so you engage in disputes and conflicts." How true. And the apostle Paul tells us that he had trouble with coveting. "I would not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, 'You shall not covet. But sin, seizing an opportunity in the commandment, produced in me all kinds of covetousness.'" Paul also tells us in Ephesians 5:5 that coveting is equivalent to idolatry. In other words you begin to worship that which you covet. That thing pushes God off the throne of your heart. And so coveting takes away your sense of gratitude towards God.

How do we put away the covetous spirit and regain the sense of gratitude? We do it by stopping that covetous sideways look at our neighbours and by looking upward to God and recognizing the richness of God. For God is rich towards his people, very rich indeed. God is rich towards us.

God is rich in his provision for all our needs. Perhaps especially at this time of the year we are reminded of God's rich provision. God's bounty is evident in the fields and on the trees. God is no stingy provider. Take a look at the apple tress, so bountiful with ripe fruit. And you don't have to go far, just 10 or 15 kilometers north or west, and see bountiful crops in the fields. Southern Ontario has been really blessed this year. Now to be sure, we have to plant, nurture and harvest as the farmer in the parable did. But did you notice one thing in the parable? Jesus said, "The land of a rich man produced abundantly." In other words, there was an strong element of gift to his abundant crops. For no matter how wise and hardworking the farmer was, he didn't produce the soil or provide the sunshine and the rainfall. He wouldn't have had such abundant crops if God had not provided all this first. God has surely provided a rich and bountiful earth for his children to inhabit and enjoy. Scientists recognize that the earth is capable of supporting twice the world's current population. Yes, there are floods and droughts and fires and earthquakes which cause hardship to many. But so often when one area suffers, another area prospers so there is sufficient for all. Now the causes of hunger and poverty are complex, but have far more to do with humans than with the God who has provided richly for our physical needs on the land, and in the sea, and beneath the earth. Think of the story of the children I told. Does that not pinpoint the source of the problem?

The richness of God is seen in his creation. God is a master painter and artist and sculptor. Just go into the countryside and marvel at how no human artist could paint anything so beautiful. In fact, the beauty that humans produce comes from the beauty that God has created. The other day, I heard an interview with Paul Henderson, who 38 years ago scored the winning goal in the famous Canada-Russia series. It made me think of what cities in the Soviet Union were like in those days -dull and grey, rows upon rows of concrete apartment buildings. The Communists forgot the human need for beauty and creative expression. It's one reason among many why the regime collapsed. God does not intend the world to be dull and grey. That's why he gives us artists and musicians, to reflect his own love of colour and beauty and harmony. God is rich in his provision, in the beauty of creation, and above all, in grace.

Look, God's gifts really are pure grace, freely given, not earned. Most of all, God has graciously provided for our salvation in Jesus Christ. We break God's holy laws, including the one forbidding coveting. We become lost in sin, heading for eternal separation from God. But God looks upon us with mercy and loving kindness. God gave his Son to suffer and take our sins upon himself in death on the Cross, to be buried, and to rise again on the third day. And now all who trust in Him are no fools, but wise indeed. We are prepared for that day when our soul is demanded of us. Trusting in Christ we will stand before God, cleansed and forgiven, inheritors of eternal life. All this was done by God for us without our earning or our deserving. God is rich towards us in grace.

Think of it in a personal way. Think of all God has graciously given you - talents, family, friends, a beautiful land in which to live, work to do, avenues of service, opportunities to enjoy God's good creation. Think of his answers to prayer, his guidance, the fellowship of the church, the faith and hope and love he has placed in your heart, the gift of a Saviour and the companionship of the Holy Spirit. Think of how often he has rescued you from your foolishness, the strength he gives you for every trial, how he feeds you at the table with the living bread. Life is never entirely fair and many things we don't understand. I can look at some others and feel a tinge of envy. But when I'm honest I have to say that God has been exceedingly rich to me. I have no reason to be anything other than very grateful. And probably it's the same with you. God is rich towards us.

And it's when we recognize God's richness that we become rich toward God. That's why the man in the parable was such a fool. God had been exceedingly rich towards him, yet he never acknowledged that by faith, or by action, or in words. He just took everything for granted, and in the end, missed out on God's greatest blessing. On the day his soul was required he had nothing of eternal value. But we can be rich toward God, by recognizing that all we have comes from God and ultimately belongs to him, by thanking Him by sharing our blessings so that all God's children share in God's bounty, by trusting in Christ as Saviour, by worship and prayer and service, by growth in knowledge and Christ-likeness. It's not that hard to be rich toward God. It begins with the upward look to the God who has richly blessed you. And that upward look cannot help but stir gratitude in your heart and bring God's praise to your lips.