

Luke 12: 13-21

I'm skating on thin ice in this sermon. I am not going to hide behind niceties. But I want you to know up front, that I am also not a heretic. But I do question whether the religion that the United States is known for is an accurate expression of God and God's creation.

There are lots and lots of sermons on this scripture reading that you can find on the internet. None would surprise you. A farmer has fertile land that allows him to grow an excess amount of crops. This abundance poses sort of a problem. What is he going to do with everything that he has been able to produce? Of course, build a bigger barn and store it up for a rainy day. He'll never have to worry about running out.

But Jesus is not too keen on the idea of the rich man storing up excess crops for himself when he really doesn't need as much as he has. What a fool you are, Jesus says. If you lose your life tonight, what good is your abundance to you? Will anybody benefit from what you have done?

All of the commentaries I read are quite quick to say that this parable is not telling us that wealth and abundance are evil. The rich man's wealth is not what makes him a fool. Rather his decision to live only for himself prompts Jesus's admonishment. The fact that he only can think of a self-centered solution to his abundance is what makes him a fool.

Other commentaries offer an interesting and compelling interpretation. The problem for the rich fool is not his ownership **of** possessions, but ownership **by** possessions.

Hoarding wealth as the rich fool did has got to be a consequence of not being able to recognize or care about the needs of others whose lands are not as fertile as the rich man's land. There seems to be a self-imposed blindness to the world around the rich man.

The supreme court's overturning of Roe v Wade was a devastating blow to the United States and morally bankrupt given the lack of resources that are available to support a majority of infants that will result from government-mandated pregnancies. The woman and infants most impacted by the court's decision are colored and/or are poor – in other words, the hard-hit women have limited resources to remedy the problem they find themselves in.

The supreme court decision is a victory for the Christian nationalists and other conservative Christian groups. Their Christian doctrine is now protected by law in several states. Many fear that other laws that protect individuals will fall like Roe v Wade until the only people whose lives are not limited by laws are white, straight men.

Christian nationalists who are bending the laws to suit then claim that they are motivated by patriotism. But Patriotism is a love for country, its constitution, and the people who live under the constitution's umbrella. Patriotism recognizes that people of diverse backgrounds make up and defend the United States. Protecting liberties and freedoms for all people is an expression of patriotism. Nationalism, on the other hand recognizes that nations have a common culture

that defines what the nation values and how the nation behaves. Nationalists think that there ought to be a common American culture that defines what an American is and what an American values. It is our American identity. Anyone who deviates from that culture and value system is not American.

What we have realized for a long time is that the values that Christian nationalists' want Americans to identify with are not the values that we have. For example, over 60% of Americans believe we ought to have legalized abortions. Christian nationalists don't support current American values, they are creating the values for us. That is scary.

"Who will benefit from what you have done", asked Jesus. We all know that it is not the 10 year old girl who was impregnated by her rapist. It is not any woman who is the victim of rape or incest. It is not the woman whose unborn baby is incompatible with life. It is not the woman who cannot financially support one more child in the family. These women and children are, instead, the victims of conservative Christian piety. The conservative Christians are enjoying their accumulation of heavenly riches. They are 1 step closer to salvation.

Why must Christians promote law over love? Ultra-conservative author and commentator, Ann Coulter, writes that societies which fail to grasp God's significance are headed toward slavery, genocide, and bestiality and that when Darwinian/evolutionary theory is widely accepted in a given society, all morality is abandoned. She joins religious conservatives from around the world who claim that a society without a strong foundation of faith would necessarily be an immoral one, bereft of ethics, values, and meaning. Indeed, the Christian Right in the United States has argued that a society without God would be hell on earth.

So, are the Christian nationalists saving our country from moral ruin? This is a question that can be answered – not too often can we apply scientific methodology to answer a question about religion. The hypothesis is this: Countries that are the least religious, at least in practice, have the most morally corrupt societies.

A sociologist from California, Phil Zuckerman, identified the 2 least religious countries in the world and went there to interview the people living in those countries and examine crime, poverty, and equality in the countries. Anyone want to guess what those 2 countries are? Denmark and Sweden. Can you guess where this conversation is going? Phil Zuckerman lived in Aarhus, Denmark for 14 months in order to interview 150 Danes and Swedes about the importance of religion in their personal lives and social lives. He published two books on his findings (a first edition and a second edition) and titled the book *Society Without God: What the Least Religious Nations Can Tell Us About Contentment*.

Denmark and Sweden are also known for another social characteristic. They are among the happiest countries in the world. Here is the most recent list of the top 7 happiest countries out of the 149 countries examined. #7 is Sweden, #6 is Norway, #5 is Netherlands, #4 is Iceland, #3 is Switzerland, #2 is Denmark, and #1 is Finland. I find it interesting to look at what criteria were used to measure happiness:

- Gross domestic product / capita
- Amount and nature of social support
- Healthy life expectancy
- Freedom to make your own life choices
- Generosity of the general population
- Perception of internal and external corruption levels.

I'll read these happiness measures again and notice how many of these characteristics are quite different from the goals of the Christian nationalists and notice how different these characteristics are from what the rich fool did with his abundance.

Zuckerman discovered recurring characteristics about Denmark that differ from other countries:

- Danes don't worry about life after death. Generally, they believe that life is finished at the time of death. So, they don't need a religion to insure their salvation.
- Danish society is healthy:
 - They have low crime rates
 - They have an excellent educational system.
 - They enjoy a strong economy
 - The arts are well supported
 - They have free health care
 - Their social policies are egalitarian

Zuckerman supports the idea that religion flourishes in malfunctioning societies and malfunctioning societies are fueled by religion. I think we have seen this two-way connection play out in multiple ways, but is this connection inevitable? Zuckerman concludes from his research that "a society without God is not only possible, but it can be quite civil and pleasant."

The obvious next question is whether a godless society is a prerequisite for a content and socially just nation. Zuckerman says yes. He is probably best known for promoting secular morality as a way to solve America's social ills. I don't know of any reason or evidence to conclude that religions of any kind, by their construct, are always harmful to humanity and the environment. Zuckerman seems to imagine that religious societies manage their religion the way the rich fool managed his abundance. Probably that is true for the more vocal religions – at least the ones that are pushing their agenda into law. It is a self-focused religion based on personal salvation at any cost. They have created rules that divide society into saved and unsaved and the unsaved are the enemies of God (or more truthfully, the religion). And the line drawn in the sand between us, the saved and the enemy, the unsaved, has hurt and diminished the personhood of too many people. It has drawn too much goodness and heart from people who turn their focus to salvation.

Religion doesn't have to be and, in many cases, isn't that way. Not all religions are self-centered. Not all religions worship religion over God. And this is where Zuckerman is off-base. But he certainly has given me pause to think about how we construct and evaluate and reform a religion to always reflect God in our changing world. Our expression of God has an open barn door. Our abundance has no meaning unless all can enjoy our abundance. Our abundance has no meaning if we put conditions on it. Our religious laws do not reflect God when people are being hurt and tormented by those laws. Our religious laws do not reflect God when they diminish the liberties and value of other people.

I'm here at Crossroads not because we are a perfect church, but because we are a self-reflective church. It matters to us that there should be no lines drawn in the sand. It matters to us that the Kingdom of God is not stored up in our barn, but overflows to all. And we seem to always ask ourselves how can we make sure our abundance flows outward. How do we reflect God?