

**"Social Capital"**  
(Lk 12:13-21)

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**Saving**

The story of the Rich Fool is a cautionary tale about material wealth; a warning to beware our tendency to accumulate more and more and share less and less. The story does not present wealth in itself as an evil. It is potentially a source of great benefit. But through the story, Jesus warns us against the "foolishness" of being so consumed with building it up, that we never end up using it to do the good things it makes possible.

I think it is an important story for us, as members of a society oriented around the accumulation of capital. Ben Franklin's words "a penny saved is a penny earned" are words we have all taken to heart. And we are a people who value independence, and do not want to depend on others or on the welfare safety-net. We do not want to burden our children with the cost of caring for us in our old age. And so we see saving money as a moral act, a way of being responsible for ourselves.

Even so, millions of us are living paycheck to paycheck today. For some it is likely a result of their failure to behave responsibly. But for many it is the result of having had low paying jobs or being hit with health care

bills or some form of financial disaster. And many of these people feel an added burden of shame or demoralization as they turn to public assistance, a burden they do not deserve to feel. It can happen to anybody and we know it. And that uncertainty drives us to want to save all the more.

### **Spending**

At the same time, we know that, as Christians, we are called to be generous. Our God calls us to live and give out of caring hearts; primarily by sharing with others in whatever ways we can. Our faith calls us to be this way, not only in situations where our financial security is certain, but even when we, as in the story of the “Widow with the Two Coins,” have limited security. Our faith calls us to live from generous hearts all the time. Not later, when we hope to have attained a greater financial security or when the conditions seem right to us. That is the sentiment Jesus gives expression to in this morning’s Gospel reading.

### **Social Capital**

But there is an additional way that we can think about the Gospel reading that I would like to address this morning, because I think this story can be applied to much more than just money. I would like to

introduce the idea of building up of what social scientists call “social capital”.

Social capital is the good will and respect that accrues to a person, when that person behaves in ways that are admired and respected by others. So, just as money can accrue to the bank accounts of people who save over time, so can good will and the trust and respect of others accrue to those who treat others well.

And just as money can be a source of power and influence for the person who wields it, social capital is also a source of power and influence, because people are much more likely to take seriously the words of those they love and respect. They are more likely to give them the benefit of the doubt (something they might not do for others) because they trust them and believe in their sincerity.

### **Hosea: Earning Social Capital**

One of the ways that one generation builds social capital in relation to another is through the way we raise our children. The Old Testament lesson this morning describes God’s relationship with his children as a great and costly emotional struggle that many parents will recognize.

God wants the best for her children and prepares the way for them in all the best possible ways. And yet they turn away from what is in their best interest. And so, in a great act of swallowing his disappointment and anger over this rejection, God preserves their freedom to choose for themselves.

If you have raised children, you may be one of the fortunate parents who has not experienced the pain of rejection so dramatically. But even if things went exceedingly well, I am sure that every parent knows on some level, the pain of loving a child who freely chooses to move away emotionally.

It is only natural. Every child must go through this separation in order to live the life that they are destined for. But for parents it is still a cause of suffering that must be accepted and quietly borne for the sake of the child's future welfare. It is the "sword" that Simeon predicted would pierce the soul of Mary, when he blessed baby Jesus in the temple. It is the same sword, the sword of love, that wounds us as we allow life to take our own children from us.

I myself like to joke that being a Dad is what gave me my grey hair. But with that grey hair should come some real social capital. Children who

grow up to realize how much they have truly received from parents who were able to swallow pain for their sakes, will very likely end up honoring them and taking their words seriously. And if they too have children, their hearts will be pierced by the same sword of love and they will come to a more powerful appreciation of what we did for them.

But our grey hair doesn't just come from child-rearing. It comes from years of dealing with a wide variety of hardships and from living through many historical changes, both positive and negative. And these experiences too should bring us social capital, especially in the eyes of those who are younger than us, because an extra 20 or 30 years of life experience should add a lot of credibility to a person's opinions. We simply know a lot more about things we have actually experienced than younger people do about things they have yet to experience.

### **Using Social Capital**

I guess what I am trying to say is that there is a lot of grey hair in this congregation that should stand for a lot of social capital that has accumulated over the years and that we should be able to think of ourselves as rather wealthy in these terms. And that is not a small thing, because it means that we probably have a lot more power and

influence than we think we have, if we are willing to put some of our social capital at risk.

A moment ago we discussed how the danger with material capital (i.e. with money and possessions) is that, like the Rich Fool, we can be so consumed with its accumulation, that we never end up putting it to good use.

I think the same danger exists when it comes to social capital. You may have given so much of your life to looking after others and building up the trust and good will associated with it, that you never really “spent” any of it. In other words, never risked saying or doing something that was important to you that could put any of that social capital at risk.

But if you or I are going to put whatever “social capital” we have earned to good use, then we can only do it by speaking from our hearts to the people who may not want to hear what we have to say, but will give us a hearing, because we have earned their trust and respect.

And there are so many matters of deep concern for the future of the world that each one of us holds in our hearts. I know, for example that nothing spoils a beautiful day for the people I love than bringing up

climate change and the need to address it. So that, even as roads are beginning to melt, railroad tracks begin to buckle, forest fires rage and various places see record temperatures, I have kept quiet in my family, for fear of turning a pleasant day, unpleasant with the reality we face. But might it be that I am the very one who has the wisdom and experience in my family to speak of these realities in a way in which they can be constructively faced? And might this not also be the case for you, as you consider the concerns you most deeply hold?

### **Reclaiming our Significance**

Somehow, in our society, the idea that our elders have something important to contribute got lost.

The general understanding is that we should save up until we reach retirement age, and then we should spend all our resources on trivial pursuits; that we are only fit to go on cruises, to do puzzles and generally disappear into a quiet life of self-indulgence, where we are considered irrelevant when it comes to matters of importance.

And in my opinion, that approach is delightful at first, but in the end, more likely to lead to the kind of despair and malaise reflected in this

morning's passage from Ecclesiastes. Eventually we all still need to have a purpose and meaningful way to contribute in order to thrive. Obviously, at some point we all lose our capabilities and retirement comes as a great blessing. But I don't think that the isolated self-absorption and irrelevance that society is inviting us to indulge in is what Jesus has in mind.

I think Jesus would see the role of the elderly very differently; as being powerful contributors in matters of importance, in part because we have been around long enough to know the pain of sacrifice, but also its fruits. We contain many deeper insights into the nature of things and possess the social and in some cases, the financial capital to influence others. And if we have some mobility, retirement affords us the freedom to put the entire day to good use.

In some ways, many of us here today, may be in a better position to make a positive impact on this world than we have ever had. And from Jesus, point of view, the thing that would be most regrettable, would be that we lose the opportunity to experience the liberation that comes from putting the treasures we have stored up to good use.

