

*A sermon for the Parish of the Epiphany, an Episcopal Church in Winchester, Massachusetts, preached by the rector, the Reverend Thomas James Brown, on the 10th Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 13 in lectionary year C. To God be the glory.*

My family had a small dairy farm, and while it wasn't our family's only livelihood, it was an important source of food, and it was most definitely the object of a lot of work. So when Jesus tells this parable about the farmer who says "relax! Eat, drink, be merry" I wonder what kind of farmer he was. There's always more work than one can get done, so merriment isn't what I remember about farming. About the time we'd feel like we were ahead of the game in making hay, a piece of equipment would break down. Even the darkness of early evening gave way to new tractors with lights on them.

In any case, after a good year the man sets about to save for a rainy day. We've all had good years. He wants to kick back and relax after the barns are built. That's fine. The problem is that he talks to himself, about himself, and only himself. Lots of first person pronouns. I shall, and I will say to my soul. And then I will, and then I shall. My soul, my goods, my barns. But that's not his only problem. The other one is that he doesn't get the difference between what *he* manages and what God does.

He has all these new barns, and he's obviously quite good at resource management. That's great. But then, given all of his business skill, he thinks he can manage the future. It's good to reassure our souls, but the farmer is making promises to himself that he can't keep, and that makes him a fool. We can't assure our souls about the future.

He's not foolish because he built barns. Every farm needs barns, and my experience was that we could have used at least two more barns than what we had. His foolhardiness leads him to think those goods will safeguard his future. He's a fool because whether he has many barns, or no barns, he'll be dead tomorrow. He's thought of everything else in the future, except that part.

Some of you will remember the older editions of the *Book of Common Prayer*. In the burial rite the officiant leads the casket into the church by saying, "We brought nothing into this world and it is certain we can carry nothing out." And when we gather every Ash Wednesday we hear those words about dust and returning to dust. The rest of the year we take our vitamins, go to the doctor, eat our oatmeal and discard all that dust and death language. I'm not suggesting that healthful living and eating oatmeal is bad (I love oatmeal), nor is Jesus preaching against a good crop and the good sense to gather it into a barn. But here's the deal: we may be the best farmer, the greatest long-range planner, the most religious oatmeal eater, and still, if we don't know that we could be dead tomorrow, we're fools.

If we expect the church, or even Jesus, to fix problems in life, or solve disputes that need resolution, we're going to leave with something that looks less like a basket of wisdom, and more like a barn of nothing. Don't hear me wrong. The life and nature of Jesus' death and resurrection still shapes the world, and our future, but faith in Christ isn't an insurance policy against hard times, or difficult questions.

Christianity has a long tradition describing Jesus in a doctrine we call the Trinity, in which we make the bold claim that even though we haven't seen God, we have seen and heard from Jesus, and the way he lived and what he said, is the way God is. Even if we brought nothing into the world, that much we can take with us.

Some of us spent the Sundays in July looking at Luke's version of the Gospel. What's interesting to me, and was pointed out by one of you, is that just a few verses after this parable about the farmer with the barns, Jesus says--still speaking to the disciples, "have no fear, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom." Remember that Jesus is headed somewhere else, to Jerusalem, where he will be killed. The farmer, turns out, isn't the only one close to death.

I wonder if our hard-working, about-to-die farmer would have had a different life if he'd known God was giving him the kingdom? Jesus announces that his kingdom is for the whole flock, including the farmer with all those barns. We can say this: Dear Mr. Farmer: Your soul is secure in life and in death. It's God's good pleasure to secure your soul. The difference now is that he can look up from all the muttering over his ledger long enough to realize it. That's what I call amazing grace. He's in and so are we.

In the meantime, the grain becomes what it always was: the means by which God cares for those who need to eat. As for the grain in our barns, or the work we're good at, or the accounts we manage, they're worthless for the purpose of soul-securing. Worthless. But they're not intended for soul-securing. They're exactly what God needs to answer our neighbor's prayer for daily bread. It's called stewardship. In the life of God, nothing goes to waste. Relax! Eat, drink and be merry.

In our relaxing, eating, drinking and being merry, we hear the One said, "this is my body, my blood, my life, my death, given for you." It's truth.