

## Full Barns/Empty Lives

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Luke 12: 13-21

Danny Cox, author of the book *Seize the Day*, tells an interesting story that hits close to home. Danny and his wife had taken a hot air balloon trip early one morning while visiting Africa. As the balloon rose gracefully, they saw a herd of wildebeest running frantically across the vast expanse below. And as they watched, the herd suddenly stopped and began looking around as if they were confused. Danny asked their pilot why the herd had stopped so suddenly and what they were looking for.

He told them that the wildebeest, which migrate by the millions across the grassy African plains, are not good learners. An entire herd will take flight at the slightest indication of danger. They will run wildly for a short time and then stop, forgetting why they began running in the first place.

Meanwhile, lions, who *are* good learners, simply follow the stampeding wildebeest herd at a leisurely pace and wait for them to stop. When the wildebeest forget why they are running, it becomes dinnertime.

What a stupid animal. Can you imagine running and running and running and then forgetting why you are running in the first place? Can you imagine running here and there and back again and then forgetting what it is you are running after? As I said at the outset, the story hits a little close to home, doesn't it?

This is the real story behind the parable in our Gospel text today about the wealthy landowner. The man had enjoyed a banner year, with fields producing a bumper crop. There was such an enormous yield that he had no place to store it all. So what did he do? He decided to tear down his barns and build bigger ones. Then he would have it made. Then he could take life easy.

But did you hear the tone of his ruminations as he thought about what to do? We have privilege to hear his soliloquy, but notice the pronouns and the tone: "I, I, my, I, I, I, I, my, my." At the end of which, we have the voice of God Himself: "You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?"

And don't we all know that this is just like life. Just when you think you have it made, just when you think you will be rewarded for hard work, just when you've moved into that new home, life comes at you and knocks you over the head from the side. Your health breaks down. The stock market drops and with it much of that pension you were counting on. You lose a loved one to an accident or disease. Just when you think you finally have it all figured out, just at the end of all your running and running and running, up pops the lion out of the grass with a big surprise. But that's life, as the cynic would say. That's life.

And what happens to the heart, mind and soul of those who are caught with full barns at the end of the day? Well, if that's all they have, if the reason behind all the running and running and running is forgotten, then one of two reactions come out and we have witnessed these. The first is bitterness – those who turn their hurt in life into anger at life, or at God, or at the world.

In Peter DeVries' novel *The Blood of the Lamb*, Don Wanderhope grows up in a religiously fluctuating environment. The death of Don's older brother pushes Don into atheism at the age of twenty. Don's wife struggles with alcoholism and other problems, and she eventually commits suicide. Then Don's beloved daughter Carol is stricken with leukemia. While dealing with the tragedy of his daughter's illness, Don makes tentative steps back toward his faith.

One day, Don stops at a church and prays in front of a statue of St. Jude, the Patron Saint of Lost Causes, that his daughter be allowed at least one more year. In that year, Don pledged to celebrate every single moment with his daughter, Carol.

That morning at the hospital, the nurses tell Don that Carol is in remission. Don comes back the next day with a cake to celebrate. Before going to the hospital, he stops at the church to pray again. On the way out, Don comes across the night nurse from the hospital. She tells him that an infection has spread through the ward. That afternoon Carol dies. And Don Wanderhope resumes his life of atheism with nothing to believe in nor hope for. And that is how the story ends.

It is only fiction, of course. But DeVries meant it to be a parable of the way many people live in this world. In fact, the name he gave the lead character is a play on words. The name Wanderhope is taken from a Dutch word, which means "Despair."

And that is how some people live. And we can appreciate their response. Life was good. Their barns were full. Their prospects were excellent. Then boom, out of the blue, their lives were turned upside-down. No wonder some people respond with bitterness and anger.

Others face life with resignation. It's life without really living. Anger, you know, won't sustain you for a lifetime. Bitterness is draining for the soul. So, many people simply give up on life. They don't have the energy for anger nor the enthusiasm for joy. They simply live one day at a time with no zest, no enthusiasms, no real life. And interestingly enough, some of these people have barns that are full. You don't have to experience a great tragedy in life to become resigned to existence.

A case in point would be the great Greek philosopher and playwright Sophocles. He was a man who had everything – he was handsome, healthy, wealthy, brilliant, powerful, successful and famous. At age eighty-nine he wrote *Oedipus*. He didn't even suffer the sorrow of having any of his children die before him as most people of the time did. In a word, he had everything most people fantasize about. But do you remember how Sophocles summed up life? He said

the best thing is never to be born. A man with everything, wishing he had never been born. What was missing from his life?

Let me go back to the parable for a moment to answer that important question. This is not a parable about dishonesty, nor about the unjust accumulation of worldly wealth. It *is* about full barns and empty lives. And lest we think this barn allegory is an image solely of the past and we can't relate, consider that in America the storage business is one of the fastest growing commercial industries; consider that 80% of the world views us as rich and wonders why we aren't happy; consider that Americans use more anti-depressants than the rest of the world combined. Full barns and empty lives. Wild running wildebeests who forget why we are running.

It was Jesus who summed up the parable with the words intended for our ears: "So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God." Being rich, possessing an abundance of belongings, isn't the problem. Forgetting God and God's voice is. Forgetting to get down on our knees and thanking God the giver of all things, the giver of life – that's the problem. Forgetting that our neighbor has needs, putting I, me, mine first and only in life – that's the problem.

John Carr, writing in *Sojourners Magazine*, said this: "For believers, the question is not 'Are you better off than you were four years ago, or eight years ago?' It's 'Are we better off? Are the poor better off? Are our children better off?' For Christians, it's not just the economy . . . It must be about what kind of society we want to be. And what kind of nation, the richest nation on earth, has 20% of its children growing up poor?"

The third alternative to life, beyond bitterness and anger, beyond resignation and defeat, is to live with the eyes and ears of faith. With God in our lives, we see all that we have as a gift from His gracious hand. With God and his arm, the church, we hear the Gospel challenge to us to use those gifts in service to others, not to live the "I, me, my" life of the landowner. We see and hear those in this world Jesus was attuned to see and hear – the lonely, the disenfranchised, the weak, the poor, the hurting – and we know that we must somehow respond.

Let me say this another way. Life, rightly understood, is a gift, and the only appropriate attitude is gratitude. Possessions, rightly understood, are also gifts, and the only proper attitude is generosity. You don't put a lamp under a bed. You don't lock away gifts in a barn, for gifts are always best enjoyed in company with others, with God's people.

How stupid those poor wildebeests are. Can you imagine running and running and running and then forgetting what you are running after? "So it is," says Jesus, "With those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God." AMEN.

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