

“Today your soul is required of you”
Tenth Sunday after Pentecost
Luke 12:13-21

Decisions, decisions.

Have you ever pondered how many decisions you make in one day?

I knew a couple who started to unwind each day at the dinner table, by asking of each other, what decisions did you make today? A good question.

Decisions about money are said to be the hardest for a family to make; and that conflict in families, and divorces initiated, because of disagreement about financial matters. ... Yet, people in general, we are told, are uneasy to speak about money. It is one of the few topics about which we feel we should have absolutely privacy and discretions.

Yet, where do we go to find answers to the many questions we have to answer responsibly; about daily spending, about what is extravagant and what is normal; about our savings. Do we invest, for example, in socially conscious funds (where the corporations in which the funds are invested help to eliminate poverty, focus on green technology, or do not contribute the making and selling of military armaments) or in the highest yield funds, which then gives us more discretionary funds to enjoy, or give away?

An individual and a church always have these questions in front of it.

For many people the questions of money are desperate questions: mothers in some of the many poorer countries need to make the agonizing choice of buying malaria nets for their children or paying the school fees—their limited funds don't allow both. They make choices daily that help to determine whether their child may live or die.

Death and money are linked together. The background to financial questions are questions of life and death; perhaps financial questions are in the mix of what Guy Noir in *Prairie Home Companion* ponders, when as we here the beginning of another mystery that involves his deliberations, we find him sitting up in his office, with the night's darkness pressing against his windows, while he tries to find answers to “life's persistent questions.”

I have enjoyed reading a new book: *Big Questions, Worthy Dreams: Mentoring Young Adults in Their Search for Meaning, Purpose, and Faith* by Sharon Daloz Parks. Her position is that young adults are not often enough asked big enough questions, by their families and communities of faith. These questions—which perhaps are questions that some of us adults are still asking—include: Who do I really want to become? How do I work toward something when I don't even know what it is? Am I lovable? Who will be there for me? Why is suffering so pervasive? What are the values and limitations of my culture? Do my actions make any real difference in the bigger scheme of things? Do I want friendship, partnership, marriage? If so, why? With whom? What is my society, or

life, or God, asking of me? Anything? What is the meaning of money? How much is enough? Is there a master plan? What constitutes meaningful work? How have I been wounded? Will I ever really heal? What do I want the future to look like—for me, for others, for the planet? What is my religion? Do I need one? Where can I be most creative? How am I complicit in patterns of injustice? How do I discern what is trustworthy? Where do I want to put my stake in the ground and invest my life?

Sharon Parks' perspective is that the church is one very important institution to become a mentoring community to help young adults answer these questions (other such institutions or occasions for mentoring include families, the natural environment, the workplace, education, and travel).

If a person is properly mentored, he or she is able to answer life's persistent questions as they arise through conflict, disappointment, the struggle of life and to move through these to become a seasoned adult. Determining how and what we know, and on whom we depend, change as we move from adolescence to adulthood. Forms of dependence, for example, move from struggles between dependent/counter dependent in the conventional adolescent through several stages to become in the tested adult to interdependence. Forms of community change from conventional/tribal in early adolescence to emerge in the mature adult into a person is open to the other, to the stranger, to compassion far beyond one's own group.

If you have not yet seen the movie "Ratatouille," do so. Charmingly, it describes, with its hero, a rat, how dreams can be small or large, how to grow from stealing to serving, how his family changes with him, and having a good time, while at it!

All of this pertains to the so-called rich fool. A famous parable circulating in the oral tradition because it is also found in the apocryphal book the Gospel of Thomas: Jesus said, in the shortened form in the Gospel of Thomas: "There was a rich man who had much money. He said, 'I will make use of my money to sow and reap, to plant and fill my barns with produce so that I shall lack nothing.'" These were the thoughts of his heart, but that very night he died. Let the one who has ears take heed.

This shortened story is like the story from Luke except that it lacks God's intervention: and God said, "You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?"

The rich fool seems to have lacked mentoring. For he is alone. What friends/relatives does this man have? The only person to whom he refers is to himself. He uses the word "I" six times in the Gospel reading. He even tells himself that he will only talk to himself: "I will say to my soul, Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years." He has not grown from being alone into an adult who is interdependent with others, and who has compassion even on strangers.

And, his question is not one of the big questions, but rather, quite small: "What shall I do, for I have no place to store my crops."

Now, that is a concrete question, a practical question. How are we to think of him? Is this a story about self-indulgent entrepreneur, or about a childless miser, who has worked himself to death? Just about to relax and enjoy, he drops dead. Are we meant to pity him, or to see his stupidity? Does the story say that all wealth is problematic (for wealth in Hebrew Scriptures is a sign of God's blessing), or is the story is about his lack of compassion? Perhaps he may want to stockpile the grain to push up the price?

In whatever way we look at him, he has not reached seasoned, wise adulthood, which is necessary to follow Jesus. His perspective is a small window on what is a large landscape. He cannot see the whole. And, so often, even usually, asking small questions yields only small answers.

This man was not mentored by a religious community, or he would know scripture, which opens windows of our understanding, which introduces us to large questions:

Ps. 14:1: "The fool says in his heart, "There is no God."

Prov. 1:7 "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom."

The bigger questions the rich fool might ask would be: Do I deserve to have all these crops? Who might they feed? How did I get them all? What is Gods purpose for me and my life?"

Let's ask big questions ourselves.

First, what is Jesus stance toward money? In the parable, crops stand for goods, and money. Simply put, "Jesus warns against every kind of greed. He refuses to identify authentic Christian existence with the possession of material wealth, even inherited—especially when abundant. It is much more important to be than to have—to be one who listens to God's word and acts on it than to live in an unnecessary abundance of wealth." (Anchor Bible series, Luke)

Jesus believed in sacrifice. If God's eye is on the sparrow, is God watching us, just as Jesus watched people in the temple one day and then made an example of the widow who gave her small coin?

Indeed, the story of the rich fools teaches that at any time, we will be asked to give an account to God. We are not our own, but belong to God. Further, all is God's. Therefore, if we have too much, and don't share, we live a lie. We use gifts from God as though they were our own. We profess to be Christian, but live as atheists. Some of the time, part of the time, this may be true.

It leads to a second big question, then, about us. Is the rich fool sometimes us (for each of us must answer the question: should we give to our pension fund, or to nonprofit

charities, or to the church; how much shall we put our financial savings at risk for Jesus' radical gospel?) and, should we have sympathy for this man or not?

A farmer, he stands in Jesus' parable for humans seduced by every form of greed, whether "peasant or statesman, craftsman or lawyer, nurse or doctor, secretary..."

He may stand for each of us at some moments.

Do you know, like I do, the glee that comes unbidden when we see the dropped dollar on the street, with which we snap it up, rationalize that we deserve it.

The reasons that may go so quickly through our minds when we are asked by a person for change—recently, I was glad that I was in the opposite lane and didn't have to answer these complicated questions or respond to my own mixed feelings.

Or, what about the gladness that we may feel because there is a comfortable amount in the bank, and we push aside the knowledge that so many brothers and sisters, yes, strangers go without.

Do we avoid making time to read about and understand international issues of poverty, social justice; in the news this week were editorials about the agriculture policy set by agribusiness that undermines the ability of poor farmers to make a living.

We can be sure that in life's big questions, including about money, that the largest window we can have, that includes the stranger, that includes God, the more Christ-like will be the answer we give.

"What should I do?" about my crops. Jesus believed that wealth distracts us from the big questions, from consideration of what life is about. Wealth stunts our imagination, of God's kingdom, because it can draw us into ourselves. John Kenneth Galbraith famously said that as people grow in wealth they come less compassionate, because deeply inside they believe that they deserve to have what they have and that others are less worthy. A stunted imagination.

What it is to be "rich toward God?" Is it to have an imagination about how the world might become closer to God's kingdom? If so, then we would grow used in our community, the church, and in our families, to risking in asking big questions growing mature enough, rich enough in God, to live by big dreams. To say "In God we trust," and live that way, too.

Children's sermon: give coins, show "In God we trust," ask whether they want to keep the coin or place in the offering.

Children's sermon: give out money for them to give in the collection plate.