

Finding Joy in a Root Shocked World

Sermon preached by Rev. Peter Cook
Rensselaerville Presbyterian Church
August 4, 2019

¹³Someone in the crowd said to him, "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me." ¹⁴But he said to him, "Friend, who set me to be a judge or arbitrator over you?" ¹⁵And he said to them, "Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions." ¹⁶Then he told them a parable: "The land of a rich man produced abundantly. ¹⁷And he thought to himself, 'What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?' ¹⁸Then he said, 'I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. ¹⁹And I will say to my soul, 'Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.' ²⁰But God said to him, 'You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?' ²¹So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God." Luke 12:13-21

As I think about the man who foolishly stored up more grain in his barns, I thought about my son when he was very young who collected Beanie Babies. These cute little stuffed animals of all kinds were hot items in the nineties. His mother and I confess that we enabled his obsession and Alex came up with quite a stash over a couple of years. There was a moment of truth, however, when we sought to orchestrate an intervention because there were so many Beanie Babies. We sought to convince him that he should donate two of them for gift boxes that were going to children in war zones. My son, however, protested fiercely, saying "Mom, I am not that kind of a boy." My wife said "if you are not now, you are about to be that kind of a boy." He finally relented and relinquished two and kept all the rest until finally, many years later, he donated them to the church rummage sale.

My son's propensity to accumulate and hold onto Beanie Babies, of course, was not unique to him. People collect Hummel sets or used cars. Some of us in my profession collect lots of books we never actually read and we build more and more book shelves to hold them and look at them to impress ourselves how intelligent we are.

And then there are some people who collect money and real estate and never use it to benefit others or really even themselves. Our tax code facilitates this hoarding. We can't get it out of our mind that, if we give bigger and bigger tax cuts to people who already have millions and billions, it will somehow create jobs and help the economy. But, in fact, all government-sponsored hoarding has meant is that people keep storing up cash in bigger and bigger barns and not contribute to the economy. One is left to ask why exactly you need several billion especially when it just parks in your bank account or another piece of empty real estate? This

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last winter one gentleman from Chicago, Kenneth Fischer, was looking for a place to park his money so he bought a penthouse for \$238 million in Manhattan. It was the most expensive piece of residential real estate in the world. Weirdly, he may only live in it a month a year leaving it empty the rest of the time but that's because he has six or seven other houses around the world he can live in. In the meantime, he has bought into a high rise, which is like a wealthy ghost town where the people who buy them rarely live there or even spend their money in the city. It's a tax write-off. Actually, the property tax rate on this amazingly expensive property is only levied on \$9 million of its \$238 million value. All the while, a middle-class home of, say, \$500,000, which someone actually lives in is taxed on its full value. Many of these homeowners have wages which have stagnated and have not appreciably climbed, which means fewer and fewer dollars go into the economy because those dollars are gobbled up with higher and higher childcare and healthcare costs. For low income renters, the problem is far worse.

As a society, we have this way of exalting those who have accumulated massive amounts in their proverbial barns by saying "Souls, you have ample goods laid up for many years: relax, eat, drink, be merry." Accumulation, which does nothing but sit there, has become the new normal in New York, which has the worst wealth inequality in the country. It is true that people take helicopters, which land on the tops of their condos, to lunch and own their game farms in Tanzania. At the same time, over 50% of the children in some of our upstate cities live below the poverty line. The hoarding of money and real estate enables the few to build bigger barns to hold their wealth. Yet we discourage their investment in communities, leaving many others behind who can't possibly purchase many of the products oligarchs produce. But the Gospel story suggests that we are fools! This very night our lives are being demanded of us. And the things we have prepared, whose will they be? But we hear, in fact, that if we store up treasures for ourselves we are not rich toward God. The Gospel invites to us to see that our joy, we believe, is found not in a massive accumulation of wealth in a few barns. The joy comes from sharing of wealth that all may participate in God's economy. Wealth should not cause separation but facilitate connection, community and relationship.

[Mindy Fullilove, author of "Root Shock", shared in a recent lecture at Union Seminary](#) that our joy and mental well being is found in investing in communities in such a way that we nurture hundreds and thousands of intricate human connections. We need to counter what she calls the "sorted-out city", which seeks to separate, segregate and disorient by alternatively offering visions of architectural and financial strategies which bring people together. She holds up a vision from Harlem where in the 1940s and 1950's there was a robust cultural and economic life, composed of churches, small businesses, social clubs, artistic ventures, and affordable homes, which made for a safe and relationally rich neighborhood because of all the interconnections. You had people who would sit out on their porches and steps on hot summer nights to watch children and youth play on the sidewalks and streets. The same could also be said for the [Italian neighborhood in Albany before it was flattened to build the Empire Plaza.](#) This was a place where generations of families lived and had a robust and interconnected cultural and economic life. Or consider small towns across New York with full storefronts which had apartments above them in close proximity to tidy small houses along tree-lined streets with

sidewalks. These places were not just nice places to look at but they were great places to live because of a myriad of interpersonal and economic connections among people, which was facilitated with designs which brought people into closer proximity to each other. Such connections contributed significantly to one's mental health and spiritual well-being.

But somewhere along the way all that outsiders and investors saw, who did not live in the neighborhood, was blight or raggedness. Wouldn't it be better, they thought, to get rid of these messy communities and send people away so we can clear the space to build a shiny tower for the wealthy with a view of the Hudson or build a stadium for a pricey sports team, or bring in an enormous government plaza, which is largely vacated on nights or the weekends, or some project to be built if we promised not to make it for low income. Let us have our shopping go to the privatized spaces of shiny shopping malls. And then let us build a superhighway which cuts a scar through a community with those old stores and neighborhoods to get people efficiently from one of those suburban shopping malls to another. This was seen as progress.

How might we live into the Gospel promise of new life where we don't foolishly build bigger barns to hoard our wealth but live into a vision of abundance which comes through sharing and neighborliness? I imagine a country where we see the inherent goodness and giftedness of who is around us no matter their income or race. I imagine a world where we share wealth and kindness with one another to create community and build up the whole. Our salvation is not found in grabbing as much as we can for ourselves while shunning others who we perceive will take away our money and our jobs. Such selfishness and exclusion make little Gospel or economic sense. Instead of idolizing the construction of inaccessible glass monuments to gentrification, I prefer to hold up an image of [what happened in Utica, New York, which saw its downtown revived](#) by immigrants and asylum seekers who bought up storefronts and buildings and started to put in businesses which brought in new life to the downtown. Explain, if you will, why it is exactly we want to do everything we can to keep people out of the country? What if the new people who come here are in fact a blessing to us as we become a blessing to them? Could we envision a country where we can change town plans and zoning laws which allow people of different income levels to purchase or rent a home they can afford and be in closer proximity to one another? It's about taking a risk on homeowners to fix up their property that has fallen into disrepair. It's about inviting people of more means to live in the neighborhood without displacing the people who already live there. We need to repeal the 2017 tax bill where 80% of the benefit went to the top 1% who mostly took the money to engage in stock buy-backs to build up more personal wealth instead of investing in the economy. In its place, we need different taxing priorities which reverse massive wealth inequality and instead encourage investment in our communities, clean energy infrastructure, healthcare and housing which is affordable at many different levels. It used to be, during the Eisenhower years, that the highest marginal rate was 90% for the most wealthy. You could, however, lower that rate if you invested money in your factories, your community and better paying jobs instead of hoarding it. These are the sorts of investments which would help everyone to thrive and facilitate a massive expansion of the middle class. Some taxes need to go up so that other taxes, like property taxes, can come down.

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We also need to invest in a healthcare system where people mustn't go into bankruptcy because they have high medical debt from high-deductible policies. It's about investing in affordable childcare so that families are not destabilized because people have no income for other needs. Churches, no matter how small, need to be bold bearers of a vision of inclusion and neighborliness which is rooted in the truth of God's abundance. Churches need to start getting out of themselves to speak out and advocate for laws and policies which will build the inclusive community God wants. Churches are places, above all, which facilitate connection. Hence, we are called to open up spaces for worship, conversation, gathering, fellowship for our neighbors while we imagine how we ourselves could use our property to be a blessing to our communities with affordable housing, schools, arts centers. Such an approach would be far better than locking our doors except on Sundays or selling off our property and shipping out to the suburbs because we cannot muster the courage to reach out to our neighbors.

Where we will find our joy? Yesterday, we saw the terrible consequence of a hoarding mentality where a man amassed so many firearms along with pockets full of ammunition and drove 9 hours from Allen, Texas to El Paso to live out an exclusionist anti-immigrant ideal outlined in a manifesto where he shot up a shopping mall, killing 20 and injuring 26. He clearly had a hard time with El Paso for its inclusionary spirit, which is right across the border from Juarez, Mexico. He did not like that two communities could work together and be so loving and welcoming. He ascribed to a racist ideology based on separation and hate and the elevation of the white race. It's hard to say, in this moment, all that must be said in the face of this tragedy. By contrast, however, I spotted this picture of the border fence separating the Mexico and American border, which, if you have seen it, is very tall with rust-colored metal posts with spaces between them. The wall is a monument to a view that we find salvation through separation. An artist, however, decided to offer a different vision. He designed [three hot pink-colored seesaws](#) with one-half of the seesaw on the Mexican side and the other on the United States side. Playfully, the American children and the Mexican children and perhaps others fleeing violence from Central America would climb on the seesaws going up and down as they laughed, as they peered at one another through the fence. Separation and accumulation can lead to death—literally. Connection and sharing brings joy. May we work for a joyful day where children and indeed all of us will be able to ride in a park on such a seesaw without a wall between us but where many may gather in community and share in the abundance that God offers to us all.