

How Much is Enough?
April 26, 2015
Luke 12:13-21

This morning's reading comes from the twelfth chapter of Luke, beginning in the thirteenth verse. It is one of many occasions Jesus answered a question by telling a parable.

Someone in the crowd said to him, "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me." But he said to him, "Friend, who set me to be a judge or arbitrator over you?"

And 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."

Then he told them a parable: "The land of a rich man produced abundantly. And he thought to himself, 'What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?'

Then 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. And I will say to my soul, Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.

'But 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?' So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God."

Let us pray . . . In a world where we can purchase anything we want with the click of a button, help us to remember that we are more than consumers. Remind us that abundant living is about living well, not living large. Take and use my words to empower our imaginations, awaken us to new possibilities, and embolden us in our actions. Amen.

I don't know much about barns, but I do know a bit about real estate. In all honesty, houses have always fascinated me. All you have to do is to start using real estate terms like location, open floor plan, lake view, amenities, and cost per square foot and I will gladly join your conversation.

So, it is my pleasure to be your guide as we go on a tour of my time in Texas through the lens of real estate.

When Susan and I got married, we began our life together in a modest single family brick home. This ideal starter home was around 1300 square feet and had 3 bedrooms, 2 bathrooms, and a 2 car garage.

Our first move took us fifteen miles away to a new construction property that was roughly twice the size of our starter home, and came with an additional bedroom.

Our next move covered about twenty miles, and led us to my hometown. Leaving behind new construction, we found our way to a home that was about as old as we were. The house was even larger than the last with 5 bedrooms and a 3 car garage. Somehow we managed to fill nearly 3,000 square feet rather quickly.

Our final move was less than a mile; it allowed us to expand with a larger home in the same neighborhood. This move gave us even more space - nearly 4,000 square feet. It also offered 5 bathrooms for our family of two, along with a lovely pool.

While we never once tore down our old home to build a bigger one, we grew quite competent in trading up to homes that were larger, pricier, and in better locations.

Our family size remained constant at two, but the number of things we owned and the number of square feet we air conditioned to contain and maintain them continued to grow. While we never spoke the words, our lifestyle suggested that bigger really is better.

When it came to real estate, if you asked me "how much is enough?," my answer for many years would have been something like "I am not sure, but perhaps just a little bit more." The ever-expanding size of our homes seemed to be just another part of the work associated with climbing the societal ladder.

Robert¹ and Edward Skidelsky² are two academics who happen to be father and son. Together they wrote a book that shares a title with this

¹ Robert, the father, is Emeritus Professor of Political Economy at the University of Warwick and a fellow of the British Academy.

² Edward, the son, is a lecturer at Exeter University specializing in aesthetics and moral philosophy.

sermon: *How Much is Enough* (2012).³ The subtitle of the book is equally important: *Money and the Good Life*.

So why do I bring this text to your attention? Because the Skidelsky's get it. They are on to something that sounds a lot like the wisdom of Jesus in this morning's parable.

In a consumer oriented world that always hungers for more, the Skidelsky's offer a much needed corrective about the good life. They envision a more balanced world in which there is less pressure to consume and also less income inequality. And, they recognize that such a world is unlikely to be realized without religion.⁴

The elder Skidelsky is widely recognized as an expert on John Maynard Keynes. If you remember much about Keynes the economist, you are likely familiar with his vision of the future. He pictured a world in which his grandchildren would work only 15 hours a week, yet earn as much as those in his generation thanks to advances in technology alongside a more even distribution of income. In this futuristic world, leisure would be primary.

Amazingly, Keynes' forecast of the increased income and productivity were accurate, but the fifteen hour work week hasn't been realized because several of his other assumptions were incorrect. Now, in the second decade of the twenty-first century, income inequality is widening in part thanks to insatiable appetites for more.⁵

After surveying history and mining the realities of the present, the Skidelskys construct a way forward that challenges many common capitalistic assumptions. This new framework requires a different understanding of wealth, happiness, and economic progress. It assumes that the basic goods are the good life rather than a means to achieve it.⁶

We need to remember that the items that comprise the good life cannot be bought or sold.⁷

³ Robert and Edward Skidelsky. *How Much is Enough? Money and the Good Life* (Other Press, 2012).

⁴ Greg Smith. "Review of How Much is Enough."

<<http://sowhatfaith.com/2012/07/09/review-of-how-much-is-enough/>>

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

In case my preaching is pushing too far into theory, I will return my focus to stuff. You know, the things that clutter our homes and, at worst, confuse our priorities.

While I am not generally a big fan of reality television, there are a few shows in that category that intrigue me. Have you ever seen the show called "Storage Wars?"

It is a half hour program focused on storage unit auctions. When people fail to pay the rental fee for their storage units for long enough, they forfeit the contents of their unit.

Think about that . . . there are enough people unable to pay for the storage of their stuff that an industry has sprung up around buying and selling the items they lost.

The original show was focused on auctions in California,⁸ but when it became a hit the show expanded by producing multiple spin-offs, including "Storage Wars - Texas."⁹

Texas was the place Susan and I started life together and the place where we started climbing the real estate ladder. Our real estate journey shifted to Florida after we completed our doctoral degrees.

The economics of life in Naples rather than wisdom of Jesus led us to start life in Southwest Florida in a much smaller place. We started off by renting a condo that was roughly half the size of our last home in Texas.

If you have ever downsized, then you know that it causes you to really rethink your things. If we needed to eliminate 10% of our stuff, we could have easily taken care of that in a day or two. If we needed to cut back and say goodbye to 25% of our belongings, we could have managed after some longer conversations. But, we needed to let go of half of everything we owned. After years of consuming, the idea of getting rid of 50% of all we had was an incredible challenge.

We said goodbye to boxes and boxes of books, rooms and rooms of furniture, decorations, and to a variety of things old and new - large and small.

⁸ Storage Wars. <<http://www.aetv.com/storage-wars/about/>>

⁹ Storage Wars: Texas. <<http://www.aetv.com/storage-wars-texas/>>

Somehow we did it. We sold or gave away half of everything we had. We moved to Florida and started our life here in a condo half the size of the home we had in Texas. And then, only then, did it begin to make sense.

Jesus was on to something. Living simply really is simpler, and better. It frees you up to become more generous. It is the kind of lesson you start learning but never finish mastering.

Since that time, my fascination with real estate hasn't waned. The movement from larger to larger, however, has been replaced with a shift to smaller and smaller.

Our first place in Florida, as I mentioned, was half the size of our last place in Texas. It was also our first and only rental.

Once we had a sense of where things were, we purchased our first home in Naples - a condo - about five miles away. It was just a tad smaller than our rental. Yes, we willingly downsized again. Only this time, instead of eliminating the 10% of stuff needed for a place that was around 10% smaller, we got rid of far more.

This time, the gifting and selling of stuff came naturally. It was logical since we were buying a place turnkey, and it was easier because we had just given away so much only months before. We were learning to live more simply.

We moved yet again in Naples just across the street and one gated community to the North. We purchased a house that is even smaller than our condo.

Many of you know my wife, Susan, has taken a job in Texas and has relocated there. The rental unit she currently calls home is smaller than any property I have mentioned.

While Jesus spoke about barns and I have talked about houses, the truth is much greater than the category of real estate. At the heart of Jesus' lesson is our basic disposition about our stuff.

I wonder . . . how will you live out your response to Jesus' parable?

Amen.