

How Much is Enough?
October 20, 2013
Luke 12:13-21

This morning's reading comes from the twelfth chapter of Luke, beginning in the thirteenth verse. It relates yet another occasion when Jesus answered a question with 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, layout, view, amenities, finishes, 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.

I spent the first thirty years of my life in the great state of Texas, living in the Dallas-Arlington-Fort Worth metropolitan area throughout.

To simplify my experience, I will divide those thirty years into two parts. Parts one and two are very different experiences.

Part one. When I was born, I came home to what was not only the first house I lived in as a child, but also the only house I ever knew during my growing up years. Over the years we had many different neighbors and nearly all of my friends moved multiple times, but we stayed put. I can still tell you the details of nearly every 1 of the 1,600 square feet in that dwelling.

Part two. Although the second part is shorter in years than the first, it offers far more sights for us to see.

When Susan and I got married, we began our life together in a modest single family brick home. That home was around 1300 square feet and had 3 bedrooms, 2 bathrooms, and a 2 car garage. It was a great place to get started - it was near perfect as a "starter home."

Within a few years, we opted to move about fifteen miles away. It was the first home we purchased together as a couple. It was nearly twice the size of our starter home, and had 4 bedrooms. Since it was new construction, it even came with that lovely new home smell.

Our next move covered about twenty miles, and returned 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.

And then we moved less than a mile to an even larger home in the same neighborhood. This move gave us even more space - nearly 4,000 square feet. We even had 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.

Let me take a break for a moment. I want to temporarily halt our parade of homes in order to introduce you to a father and son: Robert and Edward Skidelsky.

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

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

Together the two recently wrote a book that shares a title with this sermon: *How Much is Enough* (2012).¹ 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. Also it is worth noting that they recognize that while such a world could conceivably come about in response to many types of interventions, it is unlikely to be realized without religion.²

The elder Skidelsky is widely recognized as an expert on John Maynard Keynes. If you remember much about Keynes as an economist, you are likely familiar with his vision of the future. He pictured a world in

¹ Robert and Edward Skidelsky. *How Much is Enough? Money and the Good Life* (Other Press, 2012).

² Greg Smith. "Review of How Much is Enough."

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

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 primarily.

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. No, in the second decade of the twenty-first century income inequality is widening in part thanks to insatiable appetites for more.³

After surveying history and mining the realities of the present, the Skidelskys construct a way forward that challenges many of the capitalistic assumptions that are taken for granted by most people today. 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.⁴

We need to remember that the items that comprise the good life cannot be bought or sold.⁵

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

While I am not 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.

Each episode of "Storage Wars" focuses on one day of auctions at a single storage facility. The sizes of the units in default vary as do the types of content they contain. The show's main characters are all in

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

the resale business. Each wants to buy the stuff cheap enough that they can turn around and resell it for a sizable profit.

The original show was focused on auctions in California,⁶ but when it became a hit the show expanded by producing multiple spin-offs, including "Storage Wars - Texas."⁷

How did we get back to Texas? While I loved living in Texas, Susan and I eventually decided it was time for us to move on to a new place. After we had climbed several rungs on property ladder and earned our doctoral degrees, we headed for Florida.

The economics of life in Naples rather than wisdom of Jesus led us to start life here in a much smaller place. We started off in a rental 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 find new homes from 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, to rooms and rooms of furniture, to decorations, and to a variety of things old and new - large and small.

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 really does free 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. Only this part of our story, part 3, moves in a different direction.

⁶ Storage Wars. <<http://www.aetv.com/storage-wars/about/>>

⁷ Storage Wars: Texas. <<http://www.aetv.com/storage-wars-texas/>>

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 coach home. It was just a tad smaller than our rental. Yes, we willingly downsized a bit more. 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.

Then, we decided to move again. Earlier this summer we moved less than half a mile to a new place that is, once again, smaller than the last. This is the final stop on our tour of homes, though likely not the last place Susan and I will ever live.

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.

Are we ruled by our greed or fueled by our generosity?

Which perspective characterizes your attitude about things?

How will you live out your response to Jesus' parable?

Amen.