

## Advent Lutheran Church

### **How Much is Enough**

Luke 12:13-21

July 28, 2024

#### **Barns or Houses**

I don't know much about barns, but I do know a bit about real estate. Houses have always fascinated me. If you want to capture my attention simply start using real estate terms like location, open floor plan, HOA, and cost per square foot.

Let me begin with the story of my real estate experience in my 20s here in the areas around Advent Lutheran Church.

When Susan and I got married, we began our life together in a simple single family brick home 11 miles south in Mansfield. This ideal new construction starter home was around 1300 square feet and had 3 bedrooms, 2 bathrooms, and a 2 car garage.

Our first move took us further east to Cedar Hill to another new construction property. It was roughly twice the size of our first home and was two stories tall. The house came with an additional bedroom and an extra living space and sat on a corner lot.

Our next move brought us to my hometown: Arlington. We found our way to a home about 6 miles north of Advent that was about as old as we were. The house was even larger with 5 bedrooms and a 3 car garage. Somehow we managed to fill nearly 3,000 square feet rather quickly.

Our final move during this stage of life was the shortest; it allowed us to expand with a larger home in the same general neighborhood. It provided even more space, closer to 4,000 square feet. And, notably it had 5 bathrooms for our family of 2, along with 3 living areas and a lovely pool.

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

In my young adult years if you had asked me “how much is enough house?” I likely would have answered “I am not sure, but likely just a little bit more.”

While we never spoke the words, our lifestyle suggested that bigger really is better. And, sadly, reflecting back, I am all too aware that the ever-expanding size of our homes was just a symptom of a larger problem.

### **Father and Son Wisdom**

Robert<sup>1</sup> and Edward Skidelsky<sup>2</sup> are two academics who happen to be father and son. Together they wrote a book that shares a title with this sermon: *How Much is Enough?*<sup>3</sup>

I bring their book 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 less income inequality. And, they recognize that such a world is unlikely to be realized without religion.<sup>4</sup>

The elder Skidelsky is widely recognized as an expert on John Maynard Keynes. If you remember much about Keynes the economist, you likely recall 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

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

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

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

<sup>4</sup> Greg Smith. "Review of How Much is Enough." Available at [sowhatfaith.com/2012/07/09/review-of-how-much-is-enough](http://sowhatfaith.com/2012/07/09/review-of-how-much-is-enough)

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 15 hour work week hasn't been realized because several of his other assumptions were incorrect. Today, income inequality is widening in part thanks to insatiable appetites for more.

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 means that the basic goods are the good life rather than a means to achieve it.

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

### **A Personal Shift**

If I had continued on the path I established in my 20s I'd now be living in a home of at least 10,000 square feet. Thankfully, however, I learned that the quest for more – whether more square feet or more income or more stuff – is unfulfilling and counter to the Way of Jesus.

I wish I could tell you that I learned this important lesson and recalibrated my life because I suddenly became wise and holy. The reality is much messier and less flattering.

In my early 30s I accepted a call to serve a church in Naples, Florida. To say that we could not afford a home in that pricey real estate market that was anywhere near the size of what we'd become accustomed to would be an understatement.

If you have ever downsized, voluntarily or involuntarily, 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 or more of everything we owned.

After years of acquiring more and more, the idea of getting rid of 50% of all we had was an incredible challenge. Ultimately we did it. We said goodbye to boxes and boxes of books, rooms and rooms of furniture, decorations of every sort and for every season, and a variety of things old and new both large and small.

Now, quite a few years later, I can say I no longer look at real estate the same way. And that shift in perspective applies to material things and to the concept of acquisition more generally.

If you stop by my office here at Advent or at White Rock Center of Hope or if you find yourself in my home in North Arlington, you will be underwhelmed by the number of things within. The spaces are welcoming but light on stuff.

### **Treasure in Heaven**

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.

Christopher Maricle, the author of the book that inspired our summer sermon series, suggests that this is all about building up treasure in heaven rather acquiring stuff here on earth. And, he proposes we live into this priority by taking three actions: detaching from earthly possessions, maintaining an abundance mentality, and acting justly.<sup>5</sup>

I think I've spoken plainly about detachment. It doesn't mean we shouldn't own anything, but it does mean that our stuff doesn't own us. We must not be preoccupied with building up more and more here on earth.

The idea of an abundance mentality is a reminder that there is enough. Regardless of how much or how little we may have,

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<sup>5</sup> Christopher Maricle. *The Jesus Priorities: 8 Essential Habits* (Upper Room Books, 2007), p.61-86.

there is always enough to share. It is a generosity-oriented perspective. In contrast scarcity is what leads us to believe the popular lie that we don't have enough and never will so therefore we must work tirelessly and acquire endlessly. One option is liberating, relational, and generous while the other is a form of bondage, selfish, and stingy.

Finally, acting justly. As we think about our finances and our stuff, we are invited to expand our thinking beyond ourselves. We must remember that Jesus has invited us to join him in the work of co-creating the kingdom of God on earth as it already is in heaven. There is much that we can do with our resources to accelerate the arrival of a more just world for all people and for all of creation.

### **Conclusion**

Our Gospel lesson is one of Jesus' most challenging and countercultural teachings.

None of us knows how long this life will last. All of us, however, can choose how we live each day, including how we answer the question, "How much is enough?"

Siblings in Christ, I hope that your answer will shape your actions today and every day as you continue building up treasure in heaven. Amen.