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“Roaring Lion, Trembling Children” GPPC 8-3-19
Hosea 11:1-11, Luke 12:13-21

If you have the misfortune of being one of my friends on Facebook, you may be aware I have what some people claim is a slight hummingbird problem. I’m addicted to them. Each year we set up the following outside our living room window: two red hummingbird feeders with a hummingbird swing hanging above and between them (a thoughtful gift from one of you), red flowers planted nearby, a large flag with hummingbirds on it, and a ready-made hummingbird nesting area under the porch roof (never used, but there just in case somebody gets frisky).

This hummingbird paradise gets set up in mid-March so that the earliest migrating hummingbirds can eat and send text messages to the other hummingbirds heading up from the south. If the birds don’t arrive by late March, I do my hummingbird dance to entice them. If this doesn’t work, I play hard to get and announce that I do not care if they ever come. (And this always gets ‘em; I’ve never seen them arrive any later than April 13.)

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Once the birds do arrive they must be fed homemade nectar regularly—4 cups of water to 1 cup of sugar stirred until dissolved, boiled, cooled, served, leftovers refrigerated, and the feeders changed and cleaned regularly too. This goes on until early October. It's a pain in the neck, but worth it.

Hummingbirds are some of God's amazing creatures. They are the only bird that can fly backwards. They learn to recognize people, especially the people who refill their feeders. And they are also aggressive little cusses.

Here's what I've noticed. We probably have three or four hummingbirds living at our house right now. There are two hummingbird feeders with eight feeding holes on top of each feeder—sixteen total holes to drink out of. Three or four birds—sixteen feeding holes. What do you think happens? Do you think they share the feeders with glad little hummingbird hearts? Nope. Sometimes one hummingbird will be eating at one feeder and he'll see another hummingbird at the other feeder and rather than just eat in peace, he (usually the boys are worse), he will chase the other bird away. Other

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times a hummingbird will sit on top of the swing and guard both feeders. No other birds are allowed to eat, but he's not eating either. Nobody eats, because he's too busy keeping everything for himself.

But then every once in a while a miracle happens. You'll see two birds, just an inch apart, both of them eating, neither bothering the other, because there's plenty of nectar for everybody. This sharing doesn't happen often, and it doesn't last long, but miracles do happen.

Well we need a bunch of miracles in the scripture readings this morning. And we need some miracles in our world too.

Luke says somebody in the crowd tattles to Jesus, "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me." And if you were here a couple of weeks ago, you know what's coming, because Jesus never allows someone to manipulate him against another person. Jesus says, "Friend." (This is not a compliment; it's more like "Hey, buddy.") "Hey buddy, so who stuck me with being the small claims court judge for your little family squabble?" Jesus will not be manipulated.

And then Jesus turns and widens his audience to include the crowd, the disciples, and us. He sees beneath the man's intervention request a

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deeper and more dangerous issue lurking. Jesus says, “Watch out! Be on guard against all kinds of greed, because your life does not consist of how many possessions you have.”

And then Jesus tells a parable. It’s not a simple story but a story that can be interpreted in multiple ways, a story meant to tease the mind into action, a story meant to poke and prod at our conscience. You know how the story goes, but notice a few details in the retelling.

It begins, “The land of a rich man produced abundantly.” Notice the phrasing. It does not say, “The rich man *caused* the land to produce abundantly.” No, it says, “*The land* of a rich man produced abundantly.” Right away, we’re reminded that there is a force at work in the world, a force beyond what this man causes, a force of life that comes from God as a gift, thank God.

But the man only thinks to himself and about himself. And here the self-references and first person singular pronouns pile up. Count them with me. He thinks to *himself*. “What should *I* do, for *I* have no place to store *my* crops?...*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

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say to *my* soul, ‘*Soul, you* have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.’” I count 14 self-references or first person singular pronouns in just three verses. That’s impressive, even for a narcissist.

Now let’s be clear. Jesus is not telling us never to “relax, eat, drink, and be merry.” As you may recall, Jesus was known for attending a wedding party and providing the best wine, a *lot* of the best wine. He also went away to be alone and pray. And he was known for teaching people about joy. It’s important for the followers of Jesus to have good food and fun and rest in their lives. Jesus is not opposed to this.

Jesus is also not advising us to avoid planning either. If we don’t try to save and try to plan for the future we are foolish. If we fail to save and plan, other people will be stuck having to help us with our mistakes. Jesus is not attacking the man for saving and planning ahead. The issue is something else.

The parable ends. “But God says to the man, ‘You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And these things you’ve built

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up, who is going to get them?’ So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God.”

The man has saved and planned all for himself. He has gotten ready to “relax, eat, drink, and be merry.” But he has shown zero interest in anybody else. And he has shown no gratitude to God either. But he has not counted on one important detail—death. He has forgotten that his time on earth is limited, and he has no idea when his time will end.

And neither do we. Yes, God’s grace is real. Yes, God’s mercy is trustworthy. We get to heaven by God’s freely given grace and love, not our works. Nonetheless one day our earthly lives will end and we will also give an accounting to God of our lives. And nobody, nobody is taking any *stuff* with them to the accounting.

So the rich man in the story is a tragic figure. He is totally focused upon himself and he has all this stuff, but has misunderstood the purpose of life. The purpose of life is not to focus solely on ourselves and to accumulate as much stuff as we can for ourselves. No. The purpose of life is to focus beyond ourselves onto God and to give ourselves away in grateful love.

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The foolish man's problem is also our problem. Even the most faithful of us sometimes lack gratitude to God. Money and possessions are especially difficult challenges, because they are so tangible. We cannot hold *God* in our hands, but we can hold money and possessions. So they are seductive to us. And even the best of us have a tendency toward selfishness. Jesus says, "Be on your guard against all kinds of greed."

So here's an exercise. Examine our bank accounts and ask how much we are spending on recreation and how much are we giving away for God's purposes? What percentage of our money is used for things for ourselves, maybe even things we don't really need, and what percentage goes for God's purposes, even church? Do we need to make some adjustments?

And look at our calendars. How much time is spent on ourselves and how much time is given back to God in thankful worship and service? Do we need to make changes?

As one spiritual writer puts it, "Gifts given to us are gifts to be returned to the Giver. It is the one fundamental thing that is asked of us."

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This is where we become accountable. Our gifts are not just for us.

Placed in our hands, these gifts are meant to be used and shared. Each day is a day entrusted to us—a day for response.” (Gunilla Norris in *Weavings*, July/August 2009, 18.) How are we responding?

In some ways the prophet Hosea talks about the same challenge that Jesus mentions. He talks about Israel and God, and his imagery is remarkable. He says God loves Israel like a father loves a child, teaching the child to walk, taking the child in his arms, granting healing. Yet Israel keeps sacrificing to the false god Baal and offering incense to idols.

And though God’s love for Israel is like a loving mother lifting a child to her cheeks, bending down to feed her children, still Israel turns away.

What is this? It is idolatry. Like the rich man in Jesus’ parable it is idolatry—turning away from God to make something or someone else into God.

And like the parable Jesus tells, it fills God with anger. But Hosea says beyond anger God is actually full of pain at what God’s people are

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doing. And God refuses to give up on God's people. As one pastor says, "This is the story of a prodigal God who—in anguish, heartbreak, and the fiercest love—comes seeking out the children who have strayed. The last picture will be this one: God like a lion, roars; the children come trembling home." (Stacey Simpson Duke, *Feasting on the Word, Year C, Vol. 3*, 296.)

Both of the Bible passages this morning contain a lot of negative imagery, don't they? Jesus warning us about all kinds of greed. Jesus telling us about a rich man who misses the purpose of life and is called a fool. God speaking through Hosea to rage about Israel's idolatry with other gods. There is a lot of negative imagery here. Why?

Isn't it to get our attention and to remind us how important and urgent our response to God is? We tend to think, "Well, I'll respond to God later when it's easier and more convenient."

But all we have is today. Tomorrow is not promised. It breaks God's heart to see us wasting our lives being self-centered. And it leads into all sorts of self-destructive behavior.

When we embrace the idolatry of being self-centered narcissists like the man in Jesus' parable then we lose our sense of caring for

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others. We become so focused on ourselves that we miss out on the joy of loving others. We live like my beloved hummingbirds fighting over abundant, freely given food when there is actually enough for everybody.

So we need some miracles. And we pray for miracles. We pray for the Lion to roar and bring the trembling children home.

We pray for God to awaken us to the joy and responsibility of serving God in the church.

We pray for God to turn us away from sacrificing our children on the altar of gun violence and to turn us from worshiping in the sanctuary of the NRA.

We pray for God to move us out of our self-centeredness that we might offer decent affordable healthcare to all our citizens. No more excuses!

We pray for God to make us love this planet again and to protect this planet again.

And we pray for God to teach us once again “red and yellow, black and white, they are precious in God’s sight.”

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God, we need miracles. Lion, roar! Send us all trembling home.

Amen. ©Jeff Paschal