

“Pursuit”

Hosea 11:1-11, Luke 12:13-21

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The Rev. Dr. Mark W. Jennings

As we pursue other gods, our God never gives up his pursuit of us.

As we seek security, we find our only security is in God.

My former brother in law Scott, was a real security guy. He worked for the Defense Intelligence Agency in Washington, and I remember when we went to visit them, if we spent the night we needed a little tutorial on what doors we could open and what rooms we could go into during the night and not set off the motion sensors. And he had a room in the basement that was full of at least a year's supply of canned goods and dried food. He was going to keep his family secure. He was going to be ready, just in case. I also remember Erin's grandmother, whom we always called "Nana." When she came to visit us, she was always very frugal. But Erin remembers that when she was a girl and Nana would come to visit them from the Bronx, Nana always had her own plate and cup that she would keep next to the sink and everyone knew not to wash them because she would use them again. And if she used a paper towel, just a little bit, it was folded and placed carefully so she could use it again. Nana wasn't motivated so much by security, but because she had lived through the Depression and she learned the value of not wasting a thing. One person motivated by a desire for security, one by fear of what might happen and wanting to be ready, just in case.

We want to be secure. And we can be afraid of what might happen in the world. So we gather things around us. We save. Sometimes we even stockpile. Some of us can't bear to throw things away.

Things are important! But are they? For the last 90 weeks one of the books on the NY Times Bestseller List has been Marie Kondo's "The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying Up: A guide to decluttering by discarding your expendable objects all at once and taking charge of your space." That sounds like something I need, right? How many of you have stuff in your basement or your garage that you really don't need? How many of you have gotten into the extreme shopping and because it's such a good deal, you got six cases of tomato soup and a hundred tubes of toothpaste at Costco or Sam's?

How many of us want to build new shelves or have a new storage building out back to house all this stuff we might need someday? Whether we are keeping too much stuff, or going through our stuff and tidying up, in a way both are the same problem—we are thinking too much about our stuff. Is this what our lives are all about? The things we own, either how much of it we have or how it is best organized? In telling the parable about the rich fool, Jesus speaks to a person who is overly concerned about his possessions. Does this parable make you feel uncomfortable? Does it hit too close to home? Many of us who hear this parable, especially in a North American context, may wonder: Why is the rich farmer called a fool?

It would be easy for us to argue that the rich man is a wise and responsible person. He has a thriving farming business. His land has produced so abundantly that he does not have enough storage space in his barns. So he plans to pull down his barns and build bigger ones to store all his grain and goods. Then he will have ample savings set aside for the future and will be all set to enjoy his golden years. Isn't this what we are supposed to do? We have three children who are still in their 20s. Haven't I asked them if they have started contributing to a retirement account yet? Isn't that a responsible "dad" kind of question? But have I asked them if they contribute some to charity each month as well as their IRA? No, I haven't. What am I teaching them by what I ask them to do?

Isn't this what we are encouraged to strive for? Isn't it wise and responsible to save for the future? The rich farmer would probably be a good financial advisor. He seems to have things figured out. He has worked hard and saved wisely. Now he can sit back, relax, and enjoy the fruits of his labor, right? The Lutheran theologian Elizabeth Johnson says, "The rich farmer is a fool not because he is wealthy or because he saves for the future, but because he appears to live only for himself, and because he believes that he can secure his life with his abundant possessions.

When the rich man talks in this parable, he talks only to himself, and the only person he refers to is 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 say to my soul, ‘Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry’” (12:17-19).¹

The rich man’s land has produced abundantly, yet he expresses no sense of gratitude to God or to the workers who have helped him plant and harvest this bumper crop. He has more grain and goods in storage than he could ever hope to use, yet seems to have no thought of sharing it with others, and no thought of what God might require of him. He is blind to the fact that his life is not his own to secure, that his life belongs to God, and that God can demand it back at any time.

He pursues material wealth and that's all. He discovers all too soon that it is not possible to take those things with us. Is that what we pursue? Is that what our life is about? When the prophet Hosea speaks to the people of Israel, his warning to them is about what they pursue. In his case, the people of Israel have not been faithful to the God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, the God of Moses who led them out of Egypt, but they have run after other gods, they have pursued easier gods, gods who would give them what they thought they wanted, and so Hosea tells them what the natural consequences of that pursuit will be. And unfortunately that's what comes to pass for the nation of Israel. The old kingdom of David and Solomon has split into two halves, Israel in the north and Judah in the south. Israel continues to be unfaithful to God and worshipping the storm god Baal. During Hosea's time there were a series of political assassinations and the kingdom was in turmoil. The nation wanted security. Where would they find it? Some of the kings were constantly pressured to seek alliances with Egypt or with Assyria and they were caught between the two powerful nations. What would they do? What would they pursue? Material wealth, political power, stability at any cost? All of those are gods that tempt us as well. What things do we pursue? Is the most important thing to us our financial well being? Do we judge our success on whether we got a raise this year? Do we judge our church by our balance sheet? Do we judge our nation by our budget deficit? All of those things are important, but are they goals or are they gods? Do we pursue them to the exclusion of all else? Both of our passages today are about

¹ Johnson, Elisabeth. Commentary on Luke 12:13-21. *WorkingPreacher.org*. August 4, 2013.

things we pursue.

If you're like me, you've spent a bit of time the last two weeks watching the political conventions in Cleveland and Philadelphia, and I can't help but wonder what Jesus and Hosea would have to say to us. What parable would Jesus tell us after watching the conventions? What pronouncement would Hosea give after watching which gods we serve? There was a lot of pride in our country displayed in both places, and that's good for love of country is a virtue. And it's wonderful to be an American and I've been thinking this week about that phrase in the Declaration that proclaims that "all are created equal and endowed by our Creator with certain inalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." Is that what we pursue as a nation or as individuals, happiness. Whatever we need to make us happy? Do we seek happiness at the expense of all else? In thinking about these things this week I remember looking up one time that "pursuit" doesn't just mean chasing after something, it can also mean a vocation or lifestyle. "She took up the pursuit of teaching." That doesn't mean she ran after teaching, it means she practiced it. She is a teacher. The pursuit of happiness doesn't mean that we always go after what makes us happy, but it says that we have the right to be happy, to live that way. Happiness is not a god we chase after, but a state of being. Because if we make happiness a god, seeking what makes us happy to the exclusion of all else, we are just like the rich fool. We are focused only on ourselves. That's his problem.

I hope you noticed the ending of the passage in Hosea. For right after showing them their judgment, the voice of God changes: how can I give you up, O Ephraim? How can I hand you over, O Israel. These are the words of our God who even when we don't pursue him, even when we are selfish, this is the God who pursues us. This is an old story. Today we got to celebrate Caleb's baptism. And as our hearts went out to Caleb today and as we prayed for him, I hope our hearts also went out to Joe and Jaime as well. I'm sure their hearts are full today, full of love, because one of the greatest gifts we have is to love our children, in a way to be like God, to love another fully. But pray for them too. Because

their hearts will be broken. You know that. Guaranteed. We all are either parents or children. If we are parents, we've had our hearts broken more than once at children who've rebelled and run away from us. As children we've broken our parent's hearts as we've asserted our independence and tried to find our own way in the world. That's what happens when we love. We get our hearts broken. So does God.

The scholar and pastor Stacy Simpson Duke says: At the core this is one of the oldest stories there is. It first gets told in Genesis. It gets told in a thousand different ways throughout the passages of the Bible. God loves us, entirely. God creates us, delivers us, and tends us. The more God pursues, the more we turn away. It is the story of our shame. It is the story of God's grace. We know how the story ends—God does not give up.² This is not the story of the prodigal son, who having struggled with bad choices, finally comes to his senses and returns home. This the story of the prodigal God—who in anguish, heartbreak, and fiercest love—comes seeking the children who have strayed. The last image is the lion who roars, and the children, like cubs hearing their mother's voice, come trembling home. I hope that you hear that call also. As we constantly pursue other gods, God never gives up pursuing us and calling us to come home. And sooner or later we learn, that our security, our real security, is not in things, not in the accumulation of wealth, but in the constant, never-ending, never changing love of God.

² Duke, Stacy Simpson. *Feasting On The Word. Year C, vol. 3.* p. 292.