

Rev. Dr. Jim Gill

August 4, 2019

“Best Laid Plans”

Ecclesiastes 1:2;12-14; 2:18-23 Luke 12:13-21 Colossians 3:1-11

I want to begin our service with a prayer written by Jill Duffield, editor of Presbyterian Outlook in response to the mass shooting in El Paso where 20 were killed and 26 wounded Saturday morning. Tragically another mass shooting took place in Dayton Ohio that took the lives of 9 and wounded 16 this morning.

“Lord, rend our hearts and restore your goodness and mercy in our land. Through you, all things are possible, and yet we fail to claim your power to transform chaos into order, war into peace, and anger into action. We pray yet again, Lord God, yet again for your children cut down in a hail of gunfire, for families devastated, communities decimated, our country reeling from self-inflicted wounds of hate. We beg your forgiveness for our unwillingness to address the soul-sickness of our nation, the idolatry of guns and the infatuation with violence and anger and hatred. Comfort those who mourn. Heal the hurting. Strengthen the helpers. Grant courage to your people that we may not just say, “enough,” but do all we can and everything required to stop the killing in our streets. Amen.”

One of the lines from a poem by the poet Robert Burns goes like this. "The best laid plans of mice and men often go astray." I don't know how much planning mice actually do...but you know what they say, 'The early bird gets the worm, but the second mouse gets the cheese.' I love it when “they” say things like that. Another one that they say that I love goes like this. “If you want to make God laugh, make plans.” But I like this one best, “Life is what happens when you've made other plans.”

Yesterday in El Paso death is what happens when you've made other plans. Yesterday 20 people planned to go shopping. Yesterday 28 people planned to go shopping. Yesterday 1 person who had driven 800 miles from Dallas to El Paso carried out his plan.

We know what it means to have the unexpected happen to us. Intrusions range from minor inconveniences to major catastrophes like El Paso and Dayton and so many other mass shootings. Such intrusions of the unexpected evoke a variety of responses from us: irritation, frustration, anxiety, rage, grief, bitterness, or despair. Intrusions of the unexpected, however, are not the unusual. They are the usual. "Life is what happens when you've made other plans."

Jesus was teaching one day and someone in the crowd said to him, “Teacher, tell my brother to divide our father's inheritance with me.” Now there is a battle in which even Jesus didn't want to get in the middle. Have you seen how people act when it comes to dividing up estates? Even nice people sometimes go years without speaking to their siblings because one family member got some family

heirloom that someone else thought that she should get when mama's estate was divided. Sometimes these things even go to court. Such things happened in Jesus' time, too.

Jesus decided to turn this family squabble into a teaching opportunity. He told them the parable I just read to you. Actually we may have more in common with that rich man than any of us would like to admit. Some of us are dominated in one way or another by the pervasive materialism of our age--the desire for bigger--a bigger paycheck, a bigger screen, a bigger boat, a bigger house, ... a bigger barn...

Many of us already feel guilty about our affluence—our affluenza. We know that most of the world's people do not live as we do. It bothers us and yet, like the rich man we don't want to give up what we have we want to build bigger barns to store even more of our stuff.

A woman who lost her husband several years ago developed a friendship with a man who had also lost his spouse. They seemed a perfect match. All their children agreed they should get married. So a date was set and invitations were sent out. The invitations read like this: "Phil, Richard, Karen, Allison, John, Matt and Steve request the honor of your presence at the marriage of their mother and father. Because they are combining two households, they already have at least two of everything. So please, no presents! Reception and garage sale immediately following the ceremony." (1)

We do accumulate a lot of stuff, don't we? One of my favorite bits that George Carlin did was called, "A Place For My Stuff." Moving to a new house has made me well aware of how much stuff can accumulate in almost 43 years of marriage. I can envision garage sales after funerals in my children's future.

There are some principles in the story of the rich man that are critical to our lives. Like most of the stories that Jesus told, the emphasis here is on practical application. The rich man had devoted his life to acquiring goods. What would happen to the goods when his time to die came? Would they go on the auction block? Would they go to ungrateful or squabbling relatives? It's the same questions that our passage from Ecclesiastes, Psalm 49 and Colossians that we read this morning. He thought his wealth had bought security but it could not protect him from the grim reaper. Of what use was it then? Of what ultimate benefit is wealth to us? What is its proper place in our lives?

In the first place, we need to see that the tragic thing about this man's life was not his wealth but his lack of commitment to anything else in life. There was nothing in the world that he was committed to except making money. All his thoughts, all his energies, all his ambitions had to do with the accumulation of wealth. Now he had come to the place where he had all the money he would ever need. What's next? The tragedy of this man's life was not the abundance of his wealth but the poverty of his values.

Could I challenge you to make a list of the things you are committed to besides making a living--your family, your church, your community? At the same time let me challenge you to make a list of the things you do for your family besides simply supporting them. Do you take time for your spouse, for your children, your grandchildren? Patricia Clafford once said, "The work will wait while you show the child the rainbow, but the rainbow won't wait while you do the work." What are the ways that you give of yourself, not simply your money, but of yourself to the things you believe in?

What I am trying to do is to help us all avoid the snare that this rich man fell into of living only for accumulating stuff. There is never enough to satisfy. And yet stuff can never give us peace within. It takes more than stuff to build a happy family or a loving heart.

Be careful that you are not saying, "Oh, one day I will have time for these things but first I have a mortgage to pay off, an orthodontist to pay, college to save for." For those whose lives are dominated by wealth who are forever putting off more important things because they are so busy seeking after financial security tomorrow never comes. Make certain that you know what your priorities are. Decide that you will be committed to more than simply making money.

In the second place, it is important for each of us to have a plan by which we manage our resources. I said that many of us have more in common with the rich farmer than we might care to admit. Our problem is not money but it's managing the money we do have.

One man said, "It is true that money talks. Usually it says goodbye." If we do not have a plan for the wise management of our financial resources, our money will continually say goodbye to us.

Denzel Washington said, "You ain't never seen a U-Haul behind a hearse. U can't take it with you when it's your time so it's not how much u got it's what you do with it while you're here with it."

The question that God asked the rich man, "Then whose will these things be?" indicates that the man had made no provision for the disposal of his wealth after his death. It is amazing how many persons never get around to making a will. Probably we don't like to face the fact that one day we will be leaving this world's possessions behind. Making a will won't make us die any sooner. Not making a will will insure that those we leave behind will wish we had.

The rich man in that parable had a plan to store his stuff to keep it.—bigger barns. The question is, how are we planning to pass on what we have when we pass on. If we do not plan for the disposal of our earthly possessions when we go to be with God, Uncle Sam will. It might cause a few family feuds as it did in our lesson for today. Why not sit down and make a plan? That is what a will is. It's a plan for the management of our financial resources when we pass on. It's not a foolish plan like building bigger barns. That's a plan that makes God laugh. It's a

faithful plan that provides for those who follow us. That's a plan that makes God smile.

Jesus wanted his followers to be wise managers of their resources. He wants you and me to have a financial plan for our lives a budget, if you will, that we can live within. Jesus knew the wisdom of good management and good planning. Remember some of his teachings: "No one builds his house upon the sand . . ." And on another occasion, "No one builds a tower without first sitting down and counting the cost . . ."

In the third place, it is obvious that the rich fool never discovered the joy of generosity-- the joy of using his money to bring happiness to other people.

Dr. Daniel K. Pearson was an American philanthropist who a lasting impact on colleges throughout this land. Pearson grew up in poverty. He worked his way through college, living in an attic and cooking his own frugal meals. He was a school teacher, studied medicine, and afterward was a farmer. Later he engaged in the lumber business where he was quite successful. He was blessed with a wife, of whom Dr. Pearson has said, "She wanted me to make money to give it away."

Pearson had a great knack for making money. But he didn't keep it. He used it to help young people who were struggling for an education. He provided endowments to forty-seven colleges, particularly in Appalachia.

Here is how he described his life: "I have had more fun than any other rich man alive. They are welcome to their automobiles and yachts. I have discovered that giving is the most exquisite delight in the world. I intend to die penniless."

And he did. As one biographer said, he died a poor but happy man. By the dawn of the twentieth century Dr. Daniel K. Pearson had given away more than \$6,000,000. I can't even imagine how much that would be in today's dollars. Pearson knew the joy of living for others. We could truly say that he "laid up his treasure in heaven."

The lives he impacted were his "bigger barns." Wouldn't it be great if when our life is over the realtors in heaven had to say, "We're going to need a bigger barn."

You and I will probably never have six million dollars to give away, but we can learn the joy of generosity. There are worthy, often wonderful, people who need our help. And we need to give. Not for their good as much as for our own. The rich fool lived only for himself; he never learned the joy of generosity.

Without any doubt, life has its share of disappointments, misfortunes, hardships, and tragedies. The intrusion of the unexpected catches all of us off guard and unprepared. There are some things for which we can never expect. We might plan to go to WalMart. That's why we should live as those who are prepared to give an account of our lives because life, and sometimes death... is what happens when you're making plans...even best laid plans.

1. *Top Greetings*. Cited in WITandWISDOM(tm)
 2. (Waco: Word Books).
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Prayers for El Paso Episcopal Church

Giver of Life and Love, you created all people as one family and called us to live together in harmony and peace. Surround us with your love as we face the challenges and tragedies of gun violence.

For our dear ones, for our neighbors, for strangers and aliens, and those known to you alone, Loving God,
Make us instruments of your peace.

God of Righteousness, you have given our leaders, our President, the members of Congress, the judges of our courts and members of our legislatures, power and responsibility to protect us and to uphold our right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

For all who bear such responsibility, for all who struggle to discern what is right in the face of powerful political forces, Loving God,
Make us instruments of your peace.

God of Compassion, we give you thanks for first responders, for police officers, firefighters and EMTs, and all those whose duties bring them to the streets, the lobbies, the malls and the homes where the carnage of gun violence takes place day after day. Give them courage and sound judgment in the heat of the moment and grant them compassion for the victims.

For our brothers and sisters who risk their lives and their serenity as they rush to our aid, Loving God,
Make us instruments of your peace.

Merciful God, bind up the wounds of all who suffer from gun violence, those maimed and disfigured, those left alone and grieving, and those who struggle to get through one more day. Bless them with your presence and help them find hope.

For all whose lives are forever marked by the scourge of gun violence, Loving God,
Make us instruments of your peace.

God Who Remembers, may we not forget those who have died in the gun violence that we have allowed to become routine. Receive them into your heart and comfort us with your promise of eternal love and care.

For all who have died, those who die today, and those who will die tomorrow, Loving God,
Make us instruments of your peace.

God of Justice, help us, your church, find our voice. Empower us to change this broken world and to protest the needless deaths caused by gun violence. Give

us power to rise above our fear that nothing can be done and grant us the conviction to advocate for change.

For your dream of love and harmony, Loving God,
Make us instruments of your peace.

All this we pray in the name of the One who offered his life so that we might live,
Jesus the Christ. Amen