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Starting Children off

Where there are children, there is almost always a lot of stuff. There are toys and art materials and almost every toy has lots of little parts that go with it. When our family tries to reduce the amount of kid stuff we have, our children almost always protest, saying they absolutely love the things we are hoping to give or throw away — even when they haven't touched said items for months! Children very rarely respond this way out of greed. Rather, they connect experiences and feelings to objects. And, unfortunately, this practice continues throughout our lives. It is difficult to not get caught up in the cycle of collecting “stuff.” But, as disciples of Christ, we are called to use our resources to honor God rather than ourselves. In this lesson, children will explore Jesus' call to live a life focused on being “rich toward God” instead of one that aims to build up an “abundance of possessions.”

Begin your time with the children by asking them to imagine you gave each of them a million dollars. What would they do with it? Would they

buy things? Would they give it away? Would they save it? What could they do with the money that would give them joy? What could they do with the money that would give God joy?

Exploring the passage

Prepare to read Luke 12:13-21 aloud. Provide some context for the reading. Tell the children the reading comes from Luke's gospel. At this point in Luke's account of Jesus' life, Jesus is surrounded by a crowd of people. They all have questions for him and want to learn from him. Some have come because they believe he has something important to teach them. Others have come because they distrust Jesus. In the story we will hear today, someone in this crowd of people asks Jesus to deal with a situation in his family. Encourage the children to notice how Jesus responds to the person's question.

Read aloud Luke 12:13-21. After reading, ask the children to recount what the "someone" in the crowd was asking Jesus to help him with. Note that the person wants Jesus to tell his brother to share the family inheritance with him. Explain what an inheritance is and note in Jesus' lifetime, the brother referenced in this request is likely the oldest male child in the family. The oldest brother would have gotten half of his father's inheritance and the remaining half would have been divided among the other siblings. The "someone" is likely asking for part of the half received by the oldest brother.

Then ask the children to share how Jesus responds. Share that Jesus doesn't directly answer the person's request. Rather, he reminds him (and the others listening) that wealth – money, property and belongings – aren't what life is all about. Wanting more than what we have or what is given to us is greedy and an "abundance of possessions" does not give someone a good life. Jesus then tells a story about someone who saved up everything, all of his crops and all of his goods. This person spent his whole life focusing on protecting everything he had rather than living his life. He didn't get to enjoy

relationships with people, relaxation, or celebrations. Have the children wonder about these ideas. Do they believe what Jesus says is true? Is Jesus saying we shouldn't have any possessions? What is the "right" amount of possessions to have? What does give someone a good life?

Relating the passage to our lives

Extend this conversation to the children's lives. Ask them to think about a time when they really wanted to buy something or to receive something as a present. Have them share about this item. Why did they want it? How did they feel when they got it? Has that feeling lasted? Share that we often get excited when we discover something we would really like to have. And that thing may bring us happiness that may last a long time. But we also tend to buy or receive things that we do not need or that do not bring us joy. We think they will make us happy, but we discover they end up cluttering our homes.

Play the video "[What Really Sparks Joy?](#)" for the children. This video comes from The "Story of Stuff" Project, which encourages people to think about the effects consumption has on the environment and on other people. After watching the video, ask the children to reflect on what they heard. Then discuss what brings them true joy. How can we focus on the things that bring us true joy rather than collecting possessions like the man in the Bible story?

Conclude your time together by offering a prayer asking for God to help us choose and find true joy.

Adult Education

Pentecost 8C

Luke 12:13-21

In 1888, Alfred Nobel opened his newspaper and read his own obituary entitled “The merchant of death is dead.” The obituary had been written in error, of course, in response to the death of Nobel’s brother Ludvig. Alfred Nobel was the inventor of dynamite and owned an armaments manufacturer. He would live for eight more years after the obituary was written. Imagine reading your own obituary and learning that you would be remembered in such a negative way! Nobel responded by changing his will and using his great fortune to create the Nobel prizes to recognize significant accomplishments that brought “the greatest benefit on mankind.”

I wonder if Jesus’ parable functions a bit like Nobel’s obituary for us. In response to a question about inheritance, Jesus told this parable about a rich man who needed larger barns to store the abundance of his crops. The man has a conversation with himself, giving his soul a dose of hedonistic permission. Relax, eat, drink, be merry! The man doesn’t realize this will be his last night before death and his stored treasures will be left sitting in the barns, likely to be inherited by his children who will argue about how to divide the abundance.

I’m intrigued that the man talks to himself. He doesn’t talk to anyone else about how to handle his abundance. He doesn’t ask his family or friends. He doesn’t pray and seek God’s guidance on his stewardship. What does this tell us about dealing with our own abundance? Often in our culture, we are more comfortable talking about sex than we are talking about money. Do we seek the wise counsel of Christian community when we face a decision about our own abundance?

When churches develop and approve budgets, who do they talk to? Is all of the conversation internal (the church talking to itself)? Do we seek God’s will for our church budgets and abundance? Do we ask the outsiders, the neighbors, and the community leaders to hear what

they might suggest? As long as we are talking only to ourselves, our church budgets will reflect our own conveniences and preferences.)

The good news is that Jesus told the parable to a man who was trying to get his share of a family inheritance. The parable becomes an opportunity for the man to question the back story on the inheritance. How was it accumulated? What priorities does it reflect and what needs were ignored? The parable also becomes an opportunity for the man to consider his own legacy. What will his obituary say? That he had very large barns full of grain or that he was generous and faithful in building up God's kingdom? As a pastor who has officiated a lot of funerals, those are two very different journeys.

I was raised as a member of the Moravian Church. One hallmark of Moravian cemeteries is that all headstones are made of the same size and material and placed flat over the grave without any additional ornamentation. The cemetery is an embodied theological truth: in death, we are all equal. As Psalm 49 reminds us, the wise and the foolish perish together and all will leave their wealth to others. We might give it away for the kingdom or we might build a barn that somebody will be part of a legal inheritance battle. "Do not be afraid when some become rich, when the wealth of their houses increases. For when they die they will carry nothing away; their wealth will not go down after them" (Psalm 49:16-17). All of the tombstones are flat and unadorned because when we die, abundant possessions no longer matter. Only abundant faithfulness will matter.

Questions for reflection:

1. Have you written your own obituary? How do you want to be remembered?
2. When you face a major financial decision, where do you seek advice? How can you develop faithful relationships with other disciples so that you can support one another in your stewardship of resources?

3. Many people in our communities live without any extra abundance. How do you think they hear this parable? What do they hope for?