

Holiday Sermon: How Much is Enough?

Sermon for the Thanksgiving/Christmas Holiday Season

This sermon was delivered at West Newton Friends Meeting, Indianapolis, IN, in December 2006 by Jackie Speicher. Right Sharing Field Staff.

Scripture: The Parable of the Foolish Rich Man Luke 12: 15-21, 33-34

I have come to speak today wearing my Right Sharing of World Resources hat. I am a field representative for Right Sharing which is a Quaker organization started by FWCC (Friends World Committee on Consultation), 40 years ago. It has two primary missions:

1. To help alleviate the burdens of poverty in the third world by making grants to the poor, especially women, to start small businesses in order to support their families and help improve the economics of their community; and
2. To raise awareness in the developed world of the spiritual, emotional and physical burdens of affluence.

Simple living is an especially appropriate theme in the holiday season when TV, radio and print media bombard us with pressure to GIVE, GIVE, GIVE (which really means BUY, BUY, BUY; SPEND, SPEND, SPEND). Also, family, community and other social traditions often encourage us to extravagance that we can ill afford and that does little to provide lasting satisfaction, build healthy relationships or feed the spiritual hunger that gnaws at our depths.

To withstand these pressures and opt for a simpler, saner approach to the holidays takes self-consciousness and, often, courage. We are not the only ones longing for such a change, however. An Internet search for "saner holiday celebrations" provides 52,000 resources! This says to me that many in our communities desire to stop the madness and restore the holy to the holidays.

The holiday season seems to be a particularly good time to think about this second topic. A few years ago in October in the little town of Paoli, IN, I saw a great window-display on the town square. It showed Santa looking down with great distress at a witch with long black hair, pointed hat, black dress and orange and white striped stockings lying on the ground in front of him, pinned down by one of the runners of his sleigh! It was that shop owner's way of deploring how the commercialism of Christmas seems to be starting earlier and earlier every year.

He is clearly not the only one that feels that holiday celebrations can get out of control in the US. A Google search online for "sane holiday celebrations" brings up 52,000 "hits" or items to read on the topic! Financial advisors are increasingly warning against the "routine" overspending that occurs in the Christmas season, creating debts that many

must work the entire next year to pay off. However, there is another price to the extravagance of our holiday celebrations that is even more damaging than the financial one. That is what Jesus' parable of the rich but foolish farmer is all about: the spiritual dangers of abundance.

This parable has often been confusing to readers of the Bible because Jesus did not specifically say what the folly of the rich man was. The Jewish audience of Jesus' day would have understood abundant crops, or any other good fortune, as being a gift from God indicating God looked with favor upon the recipient. So accumulating wealth by itself was not considered bad. In fact, Jesus himself says, in John 10:10b (KJV), I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly.

No, it appears the rich man was not a fool because he was prosperous. Rather it was that he used his prosperity in an unwise and selfish way, letting it blind him to the needs of the less fortunate and letting it so consume his time that he had no time for God, even thought, apparently, that his good fortune was all his own doing and that he did not need God or others to have a long, full and happy life. In fact, Bible scholars suggest the follies of the rich man were many:

- Preoccupation with possessions—tearing down old barns and building new ones would have taken some good deal of time
- Security in self-sufficiency—feeling he did not need God or others to provide for his good future—a lot of I will do this and I will do that and my language— my crops, my barns, my grain, my goods.
- The grasp of greed, the opposite of generosity—not once does he think about giving some of his abundance to the poor and needy
- The hollowness of hedonism—I will eat, drink and be merry for the rest of my life
- Practical atheism—professing to believe in God but at the same time living his life as though there were no God, as though there were no divine accountability for the way that we live our lives on earth.

This might be summed up an inability to discern “How much is enough?” and how to manage his abundance with generosity toward his fellow human beings and with constant communion with and guidance from God. Jesus says, in Luke 9:25 , “What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, and yet lose or forfeit his very self?.” (His possessions will take his life from him. Then whose will they be?)

The story asks us to take a good look at our own inner lives and listen to our own inner guidance.

It has been suggested that the overspending rampant in our country today reflects an attempt by many to fill a hole or void in our lives with possessions which is actually a

spiritual hole that can only be filled by a closer relationship with God. Too often, our Christmas celebrations have gotten so far away from the original meaning that it has prompted one pundit to quip: “Whose birthday is it anyway?”

It strikes me that we Quakers, with our Testimony of Simplicity and our long history of emphasis on simple living are in a unique position to take the lead in modeling sane, compassionate commemoration of Christmas, demonstrating how to put blessed peace and the holy back in the holidays.

That is a small part of the message of Right Sharing when it calls us to pay attention to the burdens of affluence in our lives and to take steps to reorganize our lives around a spiritual center, around a deeper relationship with God.

If you are desiring a way to reclaim the spiritual meaning of Christmas for yourself and your loved ones, here are a few tips:

1. Teach children to question marketing messages and limit everyone’s exposure by monitoring TV programs, newspaper ads, and Christmas “wish-books.”
2. Resolve to relish the priceless treasures of the season: the music, smells, literature, community lights and decorations, worship, and quality family time.
3. Focus on recovering low-cost family traditions e.g., caroling, baking cookies, sharing family history.
4. Take advantage of free holiday events at churches, libraries and schools.
5. Teach children to give of themselves—volunteer as a family.
6. Give alternative gifts with meaning.
7. Make homemade gifts together.
8. Give philanthropic gifts in the names of loved ones in lieu of material items.
9. Consider giving gifts of time instead of things.
10. Be a good holiday role model for others.

It has been said we are all walking billboards, reflecting in our words and actions who we are and what we really care about. May we all find ways to live this holiday season as compassionately and spiritually as possible, as countercultural messages of peace and sanity, for ourselves, our families, our communities, and our world.