

The First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
“Luke Looks at Money: Alternative Investing”
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Genesis 1:28-31, Luke 12:13-21

It was April 22, 1889. Spread out across the prairie were more than 50,000 people. They were on horseback. They were in horse drawn carriages and wagons. And they were all waiting for one thing...the boom of a canon. Then at high noon, the boom was heard and they were off and galloping. What were they there for? They were there for land. It was the great Oklahoma Land Rush. At stake were more than one million acres of some of the best land ever stolen from the Native Americans. As they flew across the prairie they found people who had gotten there sooner, and if so they moved on. Within half a day both Oklahoma City and Guthrie went from non-existent places to towns of ten thousand people where folks staked their lots. Thousands of others claimed their 160 acres in order to begin farming and ranching. And why would they go to such lengths? They would do so because land mattered.

In some ways it is probably hard for us to imagine how important land was. But what we need to remember was that land was life. To have land meant you could feed your family. It meant you had something permanent. It meant that you were a somebody. Without land you were no more than a hired hand, a peasant, a drifter. And so since the dawn of time people sought land. Land was the cause of human migration; of imperial conquest or immigration. Most of my ancestors came to this country looking for land. In the Old World land was controlled by the very few. Everyone else was simply human machines to be used by those with land. So they came from England, Germany and Scotland. And it is this desire for land; this desire not to become a landless peasant, that is at the heart of our story this morning.

When the man comes to Jesus and asks him to adjudicate his case with his brother, he is not being greedy...which is how this is often cast in commentaries and sermons. What he is is desperate. He is desperate because the only inheritance worth dividing; the only inheritance worth dividing that someone coming to listen to Jesus would have, is land. And realize that this man, if he is cheated out of his inheritance, has no way to provide for his family and nothing to give his children. He will become one of those landless workers that crowded the squares of every Judean town desperately looking to be hired in hopes of earning a days' wage. Realizing that, we might expect Jesus to have a compassionate response. We might expect Jesus to go and find the older brother and say something like, “Hey dude, look...remember what you learned in Kindergarten, that you are to share. So buck up buddy and give your brother his share.” But he doesn't. Instead Jesus offers up this bizarre story about a successful farmer, who does all the right things and then God kills him. No offense, but this hardly makes sense...unless Jesus wanted people to think of an alternative investment strategy.

If there was one thing that Jesus understood, it was the human condition. He understood clearly what motivated and drove human beings. What this meant was that he understood that human beings invested land and things with eternal value. He knew that human beings lived with that deep

dread of death. They knew that life was fleeting and that one day they would die. And in the face of that reality, they desperately looked for something to invest in that would fool them into believing that they could somehow cheat God. Like a person hanging on with their fingertips hoping not to slip, people believed that if they had land, wealth or power they were safe. This is what is at the heart of the story of the farmer. He worked hard. The land produced. He built bigger barns to expand his inventory. He did all of the things a wise businessman would do. Yet the point of Jesus' story is that all of that personal success; all of that investing in himself...and by the way that was what he was doing, investing in himself. Notice all of the times the personal pronouns are used...would not stop death from coming. In the end he would lose it all and having nothing to show for it. Then in the closing line Jesus brings the story home. "So it is with those who store up treasure for themselves but are not rich toward God." That last half of that line lays out Jesus' alternative investment strategy; that if we want to invest in something that lasts, we invest in those things that matter to God.

So what is it that matters to God? What is it that lasts? The only thing that lasts is the Kingdom of God and the Kingdom of God is people and the world in which they live. What matters to God are people. This is the heart of Jesus message from beginning to end. Jesus comes and offers us a glimpse of this Kingdom in his preaching, his teaching, his healing and his feeding. Jesus has compassion for the hungry, the outcast and the broken. Jesus reminds people that they are those who are beloved by God because they are God's good creation. The creation itself matters to God as well because it is God's good creation. In Genesis when God declares that creation is very good, he is speaking not only of human beings but of the earth itself. This is the accusation that Jesus levels in his story about the farmer. He invested in himself and not in others, not in God's creation. He did not leave his fields to be gleaned by the poor. He did not share what he had...which by the way, I would like to point out means, that in my opinion, this entire story is not a criticism of the man who asks Jesus to intervene, but of his brother who will not share the inheritance. It is the unseen brother who is the farmer...who is investing in only himself and not in his family.

The question then becomes for us, how is our investing going? How much are we investing in ourselves and how much are we investing in the Kingdom. About nine years ago my former congregation celebrated its fiftieth anniversary. For that anniversary we produced a video in which we interviewed both new and long term members. For me the most meaningful moment in all of those interviews was when a new member began talking about the missions that our church had undertaken. We had helped to plant churches in Mexico, China, Russia and Belarus. We had helped to found the homeless shelter in San Antonio. We had been instrumental in the creation of a free eye-care non-profit that worked with the homeless and poor in San Antonio and Mexico. We had built two churches and a school in Kenya. We were involved in Foster Care work and the list goes on and on. But in the interview this member said, "You know, that if Covenant were to go out of business today there would be little bits of Covenant all over the world." And she was right. There would be because as a church family we had invested in the Kingdom of God; we had invested in what lasts.

And that is what we are doing here at First Church. We are investing in the Kingdom of God. Though you heard about keeping the lights on, the reality is that the lights are only kept on so that we can continue to invest in people. We invest in the more than 1,000 clients at FAR whose lives are enriched by what they do. We invest in the clients at Samaritan Counseling Center which is seeing

more and more Medicaid clients who cannot afford to cover the cost of their visits. We invest in the homeless when we host SOS. We invest in children when we work at Alcott and Ruth Ellis. We invest in our children and youth who are shaped by the stories from scripture. We invest in people as we worship together and have our lives regularly aligned with the love and grace of God. You and I invest in the Kingdom of God through all that happens in this place.

My challenge then is for you to prayerfully consider your asset allocation; to ask if you are allocating enough to the Kingdom of God through this church even as you take care of your own needs. Here then is my question for the week; How am I investing what I have in the Kingdom of God such that lives are changed for the better?