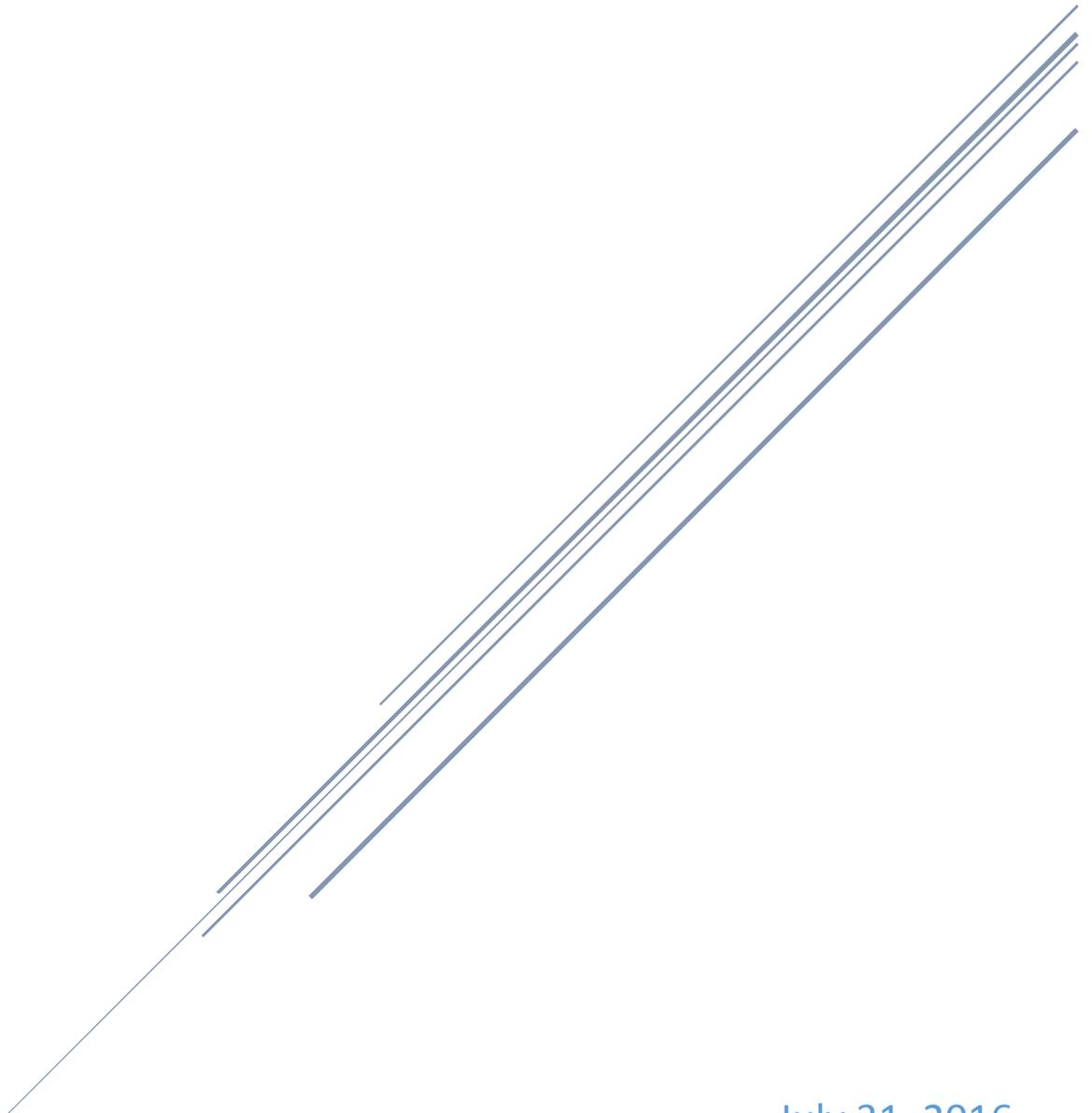


SUPERHEROES & FOOLS

Luke 12:13-21



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Pastor Brad

“Detachment is not that you should own nothing; but that nothing should own you.” – Ali ibn abi Talib

A few years ago, I saw an article in the WSJ entitled, “We Don’t Need Another Superhero.” In it, media critic James Bowman made note of the flood of superhero movies that’ve been released since 9/11. IN the decade following that infamous day almost 50 movies were released into theatres, with more on the way. Three *Superman* movies, three *X-men* movies, *Batman Begins*, *The Fantastic Four*, *The Hulk* – just to name a few.

Most people agree that that’s no accident. We are being inundated by superheroes during a time when insecurity is one of the defining qualities of our culture. Life doesn’t seem quite as secure as it used to be, does it? There was a time when we didn’t have to worry about terrorist attacks or whole groups of people whose sole mission is to kill Americans.

Even in the last couple of months as I flew to Portland for general conference, airports and train stations are still announcing “No unattended bags” and “if you see something, say something.” The news is full of updates on the strength of Al Qaeda and ISIL, or the prospect of terrorist groups in other countries and ‘ sleeper cells’ – even in our own nation.

And of course there are other reminders of our insecurity: Daily headlines offer us reminders of how fast life can go from ordinary to tragic. And if the last year or two of life in our own congregations have taught us anything, it’s that death is very much a part of life. It’s something we all face – “nobody here gets out alive!” It’s part of living, and the natural response - to all of this - is to want to feel secure again.

Maybe that’s why superheroes are so popular again. We find some comfort as well as hope watching the story of someone who’s larger than life, super-sized, able to rise above the insecurities of this world to somehow make life secure again.

Superman is a perfect example: Jerry Siegel created Superman during a time in his life when he was experiencing intense helplessness. His father had been shot and killed and the police never found the murderer. Siegel never talked much about his father’s death, but

he did something else. He created in his imagination, a bullet-proof father –who couldn't be killed -- who would go around the world fighting evil and defeating death. If he couldn't get justice for his father, he would create a world where justice was protected by a super, invulnerable, man. So, one of the first superheroes was born of the almost universal desire for security and protection in the face of insecurity and death.

I think it's fair to say we all want that, to some degree. Theologian Reinhold Niebuhr went so far as to say that human nature is a paradox. On one hand, we're immersed in nature and so we're subject to all of its perils, including death. On the other hand, human beings have the ability to transcend nature -- to ponder not only our mortality and the reality of death, but also how we might respond to it. We are bound by our limited human nature, our finitude, but at the same time we're free to respond to the dangers of life on earth in any way we choose. That could very well be what Jesus' parable of the Rich Fool is really about. It's about how we respond to insecurity, finitude, and death.

At a glance today's parable of the rich fool seems to be a pretty straight-forward story about greed. A man who wants help to get his half of the family inheritance interrupts Jesus. We can assume that this man has an older brother who is supposed to receive – or has already received -- the entire inheritance, because that's how it was done back then. The younger brother's desire to have half of the inheritance is more than just greed, though. It's not just a desire to get more stuff; it's a natural response to the reality of death. This man's father has died. As the younger son, he stands to inherit nothing, so suddenly his future, his life, has become insecure. He is trying to create security for himself and any family he might have, by fighting for more possessions.

Now, it might seem like we're reading an awful lot into one little parable, but look again: Here's a wealthy 1st century landowner whose crops are so successful that he doesn't have room to store all the food they produce. In those days, without meteorologists or the farmers' almanac, famine would hit without warning and last for years. Lives could be at risk. So this guy does what any of us would do, I think; he supersizes his barns and silos so

he can store his bumper crop, securing his future against the threat of famine. It's smart. It's smart to invest in our future, and to try to secure our lives for as long as we can, right?

But just when the landowner has finished all his preparations, suddenly his time is up. "This very night your life is being demanded of you," says God, "and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?" The landowner's attempt to secure his future is ruined by the very thing he's hoping to avoid – his death. It's kind of a sad story, but it's less about greed, I think, and more about how to live in the midst of life's insecurities.

And isn't this part of the universal human condition? When life is insecure we seek security. Sometimes our desire for security is so strong that we search relentlessly for one thing that will make life secure again. We find ourselves hoarding possessions, barricading ourselves with stuff. We place our hopes for security and happiness on one person or one thing that we keep in the center of our lives. And as long as we have that one person, or that one thing, we feel secure and happy – for a while. But that doesn't cut it in the long run. Eventually, we find ourselves searching for something else to fill the void and quench our desire to feel secure.

Do you remember that scene in the movie *Jaws* when they catch and kill a huge shark – not *the* shark -- and cut it open to see what it's been eating? They pull out a bunch of half-digested fish, and old tire, some bones, a piece of a boat, a clock, and a Louisiana license plate. Sharks are known for being voracious, indiscriminate eaters – kind of like us, searching relentlessly for one life fix after another. We're hungry people looking for wholeness and security, so we try to make our possessions fill this role for us, but that doesn't work. We're still hungry.

We try to find fulfillment in our work or in dysfunctional relationships, in this product or that drug, in supersized versions of things we never really needed in the first place. But it's not there. We consume and possess things and people indiscriminately, relentlessly grabbing for this and that, hoping to insulate ourselves from our limitations, our insecurities and our fears. And we're left longing for more.

The Greek word for ‘greed’ here is *pleonexia* -- the greedy desire to have more, covetousness, avarice. The word greed doesn’t quite go far enough. It’s the insatiable desire – the greedy desire for more. By setting the parable of the rich fool right in the middle of Jesus’ predictions of his own death and the plots to kill him, Luke links this universal human desire for more with the universal human insecurity and fear of death. Luke knows that living in an age of insecurity increases certain temptations, specifically the desire to regain security even if we have to create it ourselves. He also knows that a response like this is destined to fail, and it ‘s probably at odds with the Good News of the Gospel.

Leading up to the year 2000 and the whole change-over to the new millennium, many Christians were focusing solely on their insecurity. They expected catastrophe, computer blackouts, even the coming of the anti-Christ! And on the advice of some very concerned pastors they stocked their shelves with canned goods, generators and ammunition. Perhaps you’ve noticed that many of those who call themselves evangelicals, certain news channels, and the GOP seem to be counting on exactly that same kind of fear-based insecurity to frighten people into voting for the most unqualified nominee in the history of United States presidential elections.

Never mind the fact that this fear mongering is totally contrary to the Gospel which promises what? -- that God looks after the sparrows and the wild flowers, and even more so, we human beings.

Never mind that hoarding food and supplies and guarding them with guns is totally at odds with the Gospel.

Never mind that divisiveness, discrimination, torture, and violence are totally at odds with the Good News of Jesus’ Gospel. It amazes me that this fear and insecurity, when nurtured by pastors, news media, and politicians turns some very faithful Christians into the very antithesis of what Christians supposedly stand for.

Immediately after this parable of the rich fool, Jesus goes into one of my favorite passages:

“...do not worry about your life, what you will eat, or about your body, what you will wear. ²³For life is more than food, and the body more than clothing. ²⁴Consider the ravens: they neither sow nor reap, they have neither storehouse nor barn, and yet God feeds them. Of how much more value are you than the birds! ²⁵And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? ²⁶If then you are not able to do so small a thing as that, why do you worry about the rest? ... do not keep striving for what you are to eat and what you are to drink, and do not keep worrying. ³⁰For it is the nations of the world that strive after all these things, and your Father knows that you need them. ³¹Instead, strive for his kingdom, and these things will be given to you as well. ³² ‘Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom. ³³Sell your possessions, and give alms. Make purses for yourselves that do not wear out, an unfailing treasure in heaven, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys. ”*

Jesus speaks these words even as he approaches Jerusalem, the place where prophets go to die. Jesus speaks these words even as the scribes and Pharisees plot to kill him. How in the world could Jesus say “Don’t worry” knowing that death was right around the corner?

Jesus knew, more than any of us ever will, that God alone is in charge of our lives and our deaths. He knew that true security, true fulfillment, and true life can only be found through trust in God. Of course trusting God doesn’t mean we’re not going to die. It doesn’t mean that we won’t come face to face with some supersized problems during our run here. What it does mean, is that even when life is insecure and the threat of death is all too real, we can affirm that the God who created and reconciles the world, is the God who was, is , and always will be with us. Those things that threaten our security and our lives are still under God’s watchful, faithful eye. This is the super-sized good news: We don’t belong to ourselves, but we belong to God – infinite, larger than life, larger than death, and inconceivably gracious, loving, secure.