



Grace Lutheran Church, State College, PA

Rev. Scott E. Schul

8th Sunday after Pentecost: August 4, 2019

Sermon Title: "Clarity"

Gospel Text: Luke 12:13-21

A parable is a fictional story designed to teach something. Jesus frequently used them to knock us off balance and disrupt our notions of God and God's Kingdom. Scholar and writer Amy-Jill Levine wrote that "parables prompt [us] to see the world in a different way, to challenge, and at times to indict... [They] remind, provoke, refine, confront, [and] disturb."¹ As today's Gospel lesson illustrates, she's right. This parable involves a man who, at first glance at least, seems to be a praiseworthy individual. He is successful, wealthy, and a planner. Some might even say he's a visionary. And yet the man in the parable is the very person Jesus holds up as the one who gets it wrong. What's going on here?

To answer that, let's begin with a word – just a single word. That word is "clarity." The dictionary defines clarity as a state of clearness, something that is transparent, simple, and free of ambiguity.² Clarity is easy to envision when we apply the term to something like water. When water has clarity, you can see through it. It looks pure and clean. But when water is cloudy or muddy, we know that it's been polluted, and we recoil at the thought of putting it in our body. That kind of clarity is simple to understand. But how about clarity of mind? What does that look like?

Let me give you an example that'll be familiar to many of you. It happened on August 30, 2014. Do you remember where you were that day? Probably a few of you were in Dublin, Ireland attending a football game. The rest of you were probably watching it on TV. It was called the "Croke Park Classic," and it was about as big a game as Penn State had experienced in several years. It was also the very first game for James Franklin as Penn State's head coach.

Penn State and its opponent, the University of Central Florida, battled each other all day long in a very even and entertaining matchup. With just three seconds remaining in the game, UCF led 24-23. Penn State's chances all came down to the leg of a skinny senior placekicker named Sam Ficken.

It would be an understatement to say that Ficken's kicking career at Penn State was inconsistent. Two years earlier, he missed five field goals in a single game. Now, victory in *this* game depended on Ficken kicking the ball through those uprights 36 yards away. For those of you who watched the game, do you remember the tension? The ball was snapped. The holder placed it cleanly. Ficken launched the ball with his right leg. At first it seemed headed too far to the right, but as the ball turned end-over-end its trajectory gradually moved toward the center until it split the uprights, sending Penn State fans around the world into a joyous frenzy as the Nittany Lions won a miraculous 26-24 victory.

Sam Ficken's performance on that kick was the epitome of *clarity*. He didn't walk onto the field burdened by past failures. He wasn't thinking about what he was going to have for supper. He wasn't thinking about the cheerleaders. He wasn't thinking about the homework assignments he had waiting for him. He didn't think about *anything* except what really mattered in that moment – kicking a ball as perfectly as he could so that his team could be victorious. *Clarity* enabled him to do just that.

Clarity is likewise at the heart of Jesus's parable. The rich man's clarity was misplaced. He was totally focused on himself. You can hear it in his words. "What should **I** do, for **I** have no place to store **my** crops? **I** will do this: **I** will pull down **my** barns and build larger ones, and there **I** will store all **my** grain and **my** goods. And **I** will say to **my** soul, 'Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.'" In the business world, that sort of single-minded clarity was the key to his success. But given that he was about to die, the man's clarity about crops and barns was pointless. It was, to use a favorite expression of Pastor Lynn's, "sideways energy" that diverted and distracted the man in the parable from what really mattered, namely, his relationship with God. Preoccupation with worldly things robbed the man of his spiritual clarity.

Now again, this is just a parable. It doesn't mean we shouldn't work hard, strive for success, plan for the future, or welcome prosperity. Those things are not inherently bad. But if they or anything else divert or distract you from God, then you are lacking in clarity. You are investing your time, your energy, your trust, and your heart in *mere things*, things that might seem crucial during this little sliver of time we call "mortality," but things that will ultimately be meaningless to you in eternity.

The kind of spiritual clarity Jesus advocates in today's Gospel is tough to achieve and even tougher to maintain. But in this parable Jesus offers us a clue. He wants us to view our lives and our priorities from a unique perspective – the perspective of someone who is dying. After all, there *will* come a time when each and every one of us will close our eyes for the very last time on *this* side of heaven. It's just a fact.

Many of the most meaningful and moving moments of my ministry have come as I've spent time with people during their final days and hours of life. As I've sat with the dying there at the threshold of eternity, I've been privileged to witness an unforgettable level of spiritual clarity. They've taught me so much.

I've never heard a dying person say, "I wish I had spent less time in church." I've never heard a dying person say, "I wasted too much time praying." I've never heard a dying person say, "I wish I hadn't been so generous with my time and money." I've never heard a dying person say, "I wish I hadn't been so kind to strangers." I've never heard a dying person say, "I wish I had spent less time with family and more time accumulating possessions." I've never heard a dying person say, "I wish I'd gotten into more senseless fights about politics on Facebook." And I've never heard a dying person say, "Pastor, I'm so glad I never forgave anyone and held on to all my grudges until the bitter end."

On the contrary, in my experience, even as their very lives are evaporating, people who are actively dying are focused with laser-like intensity on using the few remaining breaths they have to *love God* and *love their neighbor*. They do this because of the radical freedom in Christ that they're able to experience when life's distractions are at long last brushed aside, and true spiritual clarity is finally present.

As Tim McGraw sang in his 2004 hit song, "Someday I hope you get the chance to live like you were dying." That's what Jesus is advocating so that we can focus on the things that really matter. This isn't about checking boxes so we can get into heaven. Salvation isn't dependent on our feeble works. Rather, Jesus calls us to *love God* and *love our neighbor* so that we might experience the most meaningful life and relationships possible. He wants us to feel love and experience joy. He wants us to be at peace. And so he reminds us in this Gospel lesson that *we need spiritual clarity*.

Friends, there are so many things in this world tugging at us and drawing us away from God's essentials. And so, Lord, we beg you: don't make us wait until we're dying to figure out what really matters. As you feed us at your table and nourish us on your Word, sweep aside the distractions. Stir us to love you and our neighbor. Help us to create a world that bears your merciful fingerprints. Please: give us clarity. Amen.

Citations

¹ Levine, *Short Stories by Jesus* (HarperOne 2014, p. 4).

² <https://www.dictionary.com/browse/clarity>