

Shakespeare Collect:

Lord of abundance, you demand our life entire and whole, lead us out from prisons of greed to a place of riches uncontained and always new, through Jesus, our common wealth. Amen.

Have you heard about the Mega Millions Lottery this weekend? Well, actually, a Mega-Billions Lottery. With no winners since April, the prize grew and grew, and on Friday with odds of one in 300 million, a person (or persons) in Illinois won the lottery. Not just a million or two, but \$134 billion dollars, or \$780 million if the winner takes a lump sum. Can you even imagine? To suddenly have such wealth is life-altering, and will demand much of the winner.

Yet, from time to time many of us have likely fantasized about winning— maybe a \$500,000, or a million or two. We can imagine our bills being paid, traveling the world, buying a new home, or car, or doing things we've always wanted to do. We might also imagine how the money could help us to help others in need, how we could make a difference in the world. With such financial abundance, our lives & relationships would change — in some ways we could name and in others we might not anticipate. This is why experts counsel new lottery winners to keep a low profile, to not go on a crazy spending spree, to beware of scammers seeking money who might put them in physical danger and of course, to get financial guidance. And as Christians, we would be called to pray for the Spirit's wisdom, to make wise choices.

While such earthly abundance can be a gift, it also can be dangerous — for it has the power to foster a self-sufficiency and self-reliance that pulls one away from dependence on God, and which could cause one to become insensitive to those in need.

At the center of today's Gospel Jesus warns about the powerful grasp of greed and the dangers of clinging to earthly abundance. It begins with a disgruntled man who calls out to Jesus, asking him to arbitrate an inheritance dispute between him and his brother. Jesus senses the man's greed, and so, refuses the request but instead tells a parable that may help the man, and his disciples, to see abundance in a new way.

The story tells of a rich man whose land produced an abundance of grain, more than he could have imagined, or was prepared to manage. We then hear as the man begins a sort of cost/benefit analysis, asking, "What should I do, for I have more than I can store?" What happens next is not thoughts of circumspection or discernment on how he could best use his bounty, but an internal dialogue which expresses the man's self-centered plotting and his preoccupation with keeping his wealth and goods for himself and his own pleasure.

Echoed in the multiple "I" and "my" statements is an expressed possessiveness and Me-centeredness: I will do this, he says; I will pull down MY barns and build larger ones; I will store MY grain and MY goods; and I will say to MY soul — Soul, you have a lot to last for a long time, so relax, eat, drink and be merry!

We hear as the man talks to himself and his own soul. With no mention of others or even God — God breaks in and says emphatically, "You fool!!". Psalm 14:1 says, "The fool says in his heart, there is no God", and here before us we witness whose actions reflect this sentiment. Even if he were to say he believed, his actions tell us that there is no room in his heart for anyone but himself.

Sadly, he fails to recognize the source of his abundance, yet, soon he will learn that he is not the master of his soul, but that his soul is in the hands of God.

If we look closely at the heart of the rich fool we might find things we, too, grapple with from time to time. First, he is alone and isolated, and has become so preoccupied with his possessions that he cannot see the poverty of heart in which he is living — his is a life absent of deeper meaning and purpose.

Then, in his self-sufficiency, he has come to believe that he needs no one. He is certain he can and will make it on his own. Rather than relying upon God for his security, the man clings to the security of things.

Further, the grasp of greed — which is the opposite of generosity — has grabbed him and won't let go. Never does a thought of the needs of others, or how he might help them cross his mind. His greed has consumed his compassion.

And while his desire to enjoy and celebrate his prosperity is not inherently bad (Ecclesiastes 8:15-19 tells us that God commends enjoyment, for people ought to eat, drink and enjoy themselves while toiling and living this temporal life) he imagines a future that only indulges his own whims and desires.

Truly, this man is plagued by what it is to be human — all the temptations of acquiring and having things, to the point of holding on so tight, there is no room for God. Maybe he is greedy? Maybe he is afraid of not having enough? Maybe he has lost sight of God, the giver of abundance who, when life gives us more than we can manage, or more than we need, will help and guide us forward.

And so, we may wonder: Is wealth good or bad? Is wealth a sign of God's goodness and blessing, or is it dangerous, especially if not used prudently?

In the book of Sirach, the writer offers this insight:

*“good things and bad things, life and death,
poverty and wealth, come from the Lord.*

The Lord's gift remains with the devout and his favor brings lasting success.

One becomes rich through diligence in self denial and the reward allotted to him is this:

When he says, “I have found rest, and now I shall rest on my goods!”,

he does not know how long it will be until he leaves them to others and dies”

When we reap abundance in our lives, like the rich man whose fields have produced abundantly, it is a blessing from God that demands both our prudence and fidelity in making provisions for the whole community. Winning the lottery, having an abundance of wealth, or things, or resources isn't in itself bad, provided we stay anchored in God, and remember that we are to share out of our abundance, including the abundant love of God.

As our collect said today, God demands our lives: entirely and wholly. In return, God promises uncontained riches and more heavenly abundance than we can imagine.

The Invitation before us is to take a look at ourselves, our own lives, and to see where our abundance lies. Where has God graced us with abundance? Then to give thanks for all we have, and to seek where we can share it with others.