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## *The Good Life*

**A sermon by the Rev. Canon Julia Mitchener**  
**Proper 13 – Year C**

Sometimes Jesus can be a real disappointment. There, now—I've said it. I've said the quiet part out loud. Sometimes Jesus can be a real disappointment. The gospels are chock full of stories of him not doing what others desperately want him to do. Some of these "others" are people who are very close to Jesus—people like his own mother. Remember that incident at the wedding at Cana? Mary says to her boy, *Hey, Buddy, there's no wine left! Do your mom a favor and make things right so this nice family who've lived next door to us since you were a toddler won't feel embarrassed.* To which Jesus replies, "Woman, what does this have to do with me? My hour has not yet come" (John 2: 4). Hmm-mph. Okay, first of all, who addresses their mother as "Woman"? Especially when that mother gave birth to them in a stable or a cave or whatever it was in the days before there were epidurals. In my house, that would get you . . .

But I digress. Suffice it to say, Jesus doesn't mind saying no to his nearest and dearest. He certainly doesn't mind saying no to perfect strangers. Take this morning's gospel lesson, when someone in the crowd approaches Jesus to ask if he will "tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me." Now, to us, this may seem strange. Asking an itinerant religious teacher to help settle an estate? I mean, please don't ever approach me with anything like that—maybe George, since he used to be a lawyer, but even that might be pushing it! Here's the thing, though: Rabbis in Jesus' day actually did get involved in these sorts of matters. They did so all the time. So the guy in our gospel reading isn't necessarily asking for anything extraordinary. Yet Jesus refuses him. Jesus refuses him and then tells a story. It's a story about a wealthy farmer who has an incredible harvest, one so big that he can't fit all his grain into his barns. So he decides he will build larger barns, thinking that he will now be set for life. Only problem? Apparently, he is going to die soon—really soon. "You fool!" God tells him. "This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?" Jesus underscores this odd little parable with an admonition: "Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed," he says. "For one's life does not depend on the abundance of possessions."

Well, what is Jesus up to here? Why does he offer this rather harrowing and dramatic story in response to a man, who, it seems, may not be asking for anything terribly unreasonable? I think at least one answer lies in the phrase, "One's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions." *One's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.* You see, life is one of Jesus' great concerns. One of Jesus' primary identities throughout the New Testament is as life giver, the one who brings life, the one who brings life even out of death. "I came that they may have life," Jesus tells us in John's gospel (John 10:10). "I came that they may have life and have it abundantly." Again and again, this is Jesus' work. He brings to life people and situations who have long since been given up for dead—lepers, tax collectors, a little girl with no pulse, a beloved friend whose body has already begun to stink.

Part of Jesus' work here involves trying to convince those who don't appear to be dead at all—those, who, in fact, by conventional wisdom, seem to be thriving—part of Jesus' work involves trying to convince those who don't appear to be dead at all that there is more to life than things such as, say, laying claim to your inheritance or doing what is expected of you by society or being righteous in the eyes of others. Besides the life that the surrounding culture lifts up—the life of success and fame and fortune, of longevity and rectitude and certitude—besides the life that the surrounding culture lifts up, there is another life, a life the author of the First Letter to Timothy refers to as "the life that is really life." Or, in the words of this morning's gospel, the life that is "rich toward God." This is the life that embodies the topsy-turvy world of the Kingdom of God, a world in which the poor, the mournful, and the persecuted are called "blessed." A world in which the first are last, and the last are

first. A world in which the unloved are cherished and the downcast lifted up. This is what, in Jesus' economy, constitutes "the good life."

Well, this is challenging stuff, at least it is for me. My guess is, most of us here today could come to a fairly quick consensus on what constitutes "the good life," and it wouldn't include poverty, persecution, and coming in last. For many of us, living well might indeed involve having a certain amount of money. For others, it might be getting our children successfully through school and seeing them grow up and be happy. It might mean living until we're a ripe old age, then dying in our sleep after a wonderful evening with friends. It might mean gaining recognition and respect at work or at least being well liked by our peers.

It might mean any number of things to which this morning's reading from Luke basically says no. No. Not that there's anything inherently wrong with them, it's just that they are not, according to Jesus, what determines whether or not a person is truly alive. The strange testimony of the Gospel, in fact, is that you can be completely lacking in all these things—things that the world tells us are so important—your life can be completely falling apart, even to the point of death, and you can still live. You can live big time. You can live a life that no amount of money, success, popularity, esteem, health, or certitude could ever give you.

Isn't this bizarre? I'd be inclined not to believe it if I hadn't seen it for myself, if I hadn't occasionally experienced it for myself, if I hadn't heard about it in the great stories of the saints—saints like Martin Luther King, Jr., who, on the night before he was assassinated, said, "Like anyone, I'd like to have a long life—longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will . . . And so I'm happy tonight; I'm not worried about anything; I'm not fearing any man."<sup>[1]</sup>

Kate Bowler was a 35-year-old professor at Duke Divinity School and had just published a book on the history of the American prosperity gospel titled *Blessed* when she was diagnosed with Stage IV colon cancer. In the books and podcasts she has produced since then, Bowler speaks about having come to terms with the reality that, contrary to the teachings of the sort of religion she has devoted her whole professional life to studying, things don't always "work out." In fact, sometimes, they go spectacularly wrong and stay that way. Sometimes things go so wrong that a person is left wondering whether she will get to see her toddler son grow up or even finish kindergarten. Even against this backdrop, however, Bowler says she has found it possible to access previously untapped sources of joy, comfort, and peace. In the midst of her pain and struggle, she has experienced that "God is here anyway, and this is enough."<sup>[2]</sup>

*God is here anyway, and this is enough.* Friends, this sort of living—this upside-down, conventional-wisdom-busting life that is rich toward God, though poor in the eyes of the world—this life is available to you and me today, in Jesus Christ. Not tomorrow, after we see the doctor and learn that our lab work has checked out okay. Not in a year, after we've gotten our last child through college and can finally retire or buy that beach house. Not depending on whether we have come to church this morning feeling joyful or depressed; having just received a raise at work or a pink slip; having made the team or having been cut. Not depending on whether we get our share of the inheritance; not depending on whether we won the Powerball on Friday night (I'm assuming, by the way, that none of us here did. If I'm wrong, please see David Rocchio immediately following this service to adjust your pledge!). Jesus' "life more abundant," the life that is really life—this life is available to each of us this very morning, whatever our circumstances. Right here, right now—at this table at which we will soon feast and out in the world for which Jesus died. Just as our life may be demanded of us this day, so it may be given to us as well. Amen.

<sup>[1]</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr., "I've Been to the Mountaintop."

<sup>[2]</sup> "Everything Happens" podcast with Kate Bowler and "Meet Kate" on katecbowler, Instagram