

MANAGING OUR MIRACLES

It was one of those BLESSED, autumn EPIPHANIES. It was a COOL, breezy October evening at our place on the pond. We'd had a wonderful MEAL, talked with our KIDS on the phone, and were sitting on the porch, overlooking the water and the sunset. And I couldn't help but THINK about the fact that ALL was RIGHT with my world at that particular moment. My family was relatively healthy and happy, well-fed and well-housed. And I thought to myself: *LIFE is GOOD! It doesn't GET any better than THIS!* I hope that YOU are blessed with SIMILAR moments of contentment, maybe at the beach or in the mountains, at a graduation, or romping in the yard with your grandchildren, or examining your scorecard, pleased to be only 4 over PAR. Such moments of contentment are a JOY!

But our SCRIPTURE Lesson today begins NOT with a moment of CONTENTMENT, but a moment of QUANDARY. The RICH man has a PROBLEM. HE has been the beneficiary of a SPECTACULAR harvest, a harvest SO abundant that he has NOWHERE to STORE all his GRAIN. SO, says Jesus: *He thought to himself, 'WHAT shall I DO with ALL this GRAIN? I KNOW! I will do THIS: I will pull DOWN my BARNs and build BIGGER ones, and THERE, I will store ALL my grain and my goods.'* Wow! THAT seems like DRASTIC action, doesn't it? He doesn't just build an ADDITION, or build NEW barns to augment the OLD ones. HE actually tears DOWN his OLD barns and builds NEW barns, which of course, UNDERSCORES the fact that THIS has been SOME kind of HARVEST! This man hasn't just done WELL! HE has done MIRACULOUSLY well! And of course, being SO rich and SO successful, HE doesn't need to consult with ANYONE; his conversation can be a MONOLOGUE. And he continues: *And I will SAY to my SOUL: 'SOUL, you have AMPLE goods laid up for MANY years. RELAX! Eat, drink and be merry!'*

Friends, I KNOW this story, don't YOU? *Wow, you've GRADUATED! Why don't you take the summer OFF and have a GOOD time. You DESERVE it! Relax! Or, Hey, you're 10 pounds UNDER the ideal weight for a guy your AGE! Man, you've got it MADE! Relax. Eat, drink and be merry. Or, You know: YOU have TWO really great KIDS, one in LAW school, and the other in MED school. You must be an A+ parent! So, relax. Eat, drink and be merry. Or, Look at this: you have a great JOB, a pretty stable MARRIAGE, KIDS who have never been in trouble. WHAT a GUY! YOU deserve to RELAX. Eat, drink and be merry!"* OR, *Look at ALL your STUFF: a diploma on the wall, a monthly PRINTOUT of your IRA account, PICTURES of your chaste and obedient KIDS, a CAR for everyone in the house... and a JACUZZI besides! Man, YOU have AMPLE goods laid up for MANY years. Relax. Eat, drink and be merry. Yes, we KNOW THIS story, don't we?*

Now, we CALL this parable, *the Parable of the Rich FOOL*. But JESUS doesn't call it that! JESUS begins this story, NOT by speaking about the MAN, but by speaking about the LAND and its BOUNTY, about that great big HARVEST. He says: *The LAND of a rich man produced ABUNDANTLY*. You see: what FIRST impresses JESUS is that miraculous, BARN-BURSTING HARVEST, and the GIFT that it is. And only THEN does the blessing becomes a BURDEN. Only THEN does the GIFT becomes a PROBLEM. And SO, instead of a MIRACLE story, the story BECOMES: *How do I MANAGE MY MIRACLE? WHAT should I DO about it? I have no PLACE to store all MY crops! SO, I will do THIS: I will pull down MY barns and build BIGGER ones. And THERE, I will store MY grain and MY goods. And I will say to MY soul: 'Relax. You have AMPLE goods laid up for MANY years. EAT, DRINK and be merry.'* And friends, THAT'S what this story is REALLY about, isn't it? HOW do I manage MY miracle? And THAT'S the SAME dilemma that we in North America have been struggling with for at least as long as I'VE been alive.

I mean, let's FACE it: aren't WE working on this SAME issue? Aren't WE trying to MANAGE all this miraculous ABUNDANCE that WE have been blessed with? Hasn't one of the fastest growing segments of our gross national product been the STORAGE business? Until just RECENTLY, investors haven't been able to build these self-storage units FAST enough. Well, that's ONE way of MANAGING our MIRACLE, and DEALING with our ABUNDANCE! OR, just LOOK at how much bigger HOMES have gotten! And would it SURPRISE you to LEARN that it's NOT usually BIG families, with LOTS of kids, who PURCHASE these HOMES? THEY generally can't AFFORD it. No, it's people MY age, people with GROWN children. And WHY do WE need such BIG houses? I have a colleague who had a man from a POOR area of Ecuador come and live with him for awhile. And I'll NEVER forget the question asked by that man from ECUADOR after he'd been living in my colleague's HOUSE for a few days. He asked: *WHY do you have such a BIG house, with SO many rooms, when you and your wife are almost NEVER here?* Well, that's ANOTHER way of MANAGING our MIRACLE! It's OUR way of building bigger and bigger BARNs! And THEN, of course, we need a SECURITY system to protect all our STUFF! And that's been ANOTHER of America's fastest-growing businesses.

Now, in the parable, you'll notice that, SO far, ALL the talk has been a MONOLOGUE by the rich farmer. He TALKS to himself, PLANS for himself, CONGRATULATES himself, and CELEBRATES himself. It's like he's saying: *I manage by MY and ME!* And ONLY at the END of the parable does ANOTHER voice INTRUDE into the story. And THAT is the voice of GOD. And NOTICE that the voice of God does NOT accuse this rich man of INJUSTICE or IMMORALITY or even GREED. God SIMPLY says to him: *You FOOL!* Now, in OUR culture, THAT doesn't make SENSE. I mean, WHY would God call him a "FOOL," when WE might call him "PRUDENT?" After all, he DIDN'T get what he got UNJUSTLY or IMMORALLY. He didn't STEAL it! MOREOVER, he's SAVING it for the FUTURE, as INSURANCE against future downturns. SO, WHY would God call him a FOOL? *You FOOL! This VERY night your LIFE is being DEMANDED of you. And the THINGS you have prepared, WHOSE will they be?* END of STORY.

Well, in the GREEK, in the original LANGUAGE of our Scripture Lesson, it actually says: *You FOOL! THIS very night, THEY shall demand your LIFE. THEY? WHO is "they?"* Well, I think God means "all of his THINGS." After all, the story closes with the question: *And WHOSE will THEY (the things) BE?"* SO, isn't it IRONIC? This FARMER thought that his THINGS were HIS problem and HIS opportunity and HIS insurance policy. He thought that they were HIS to MANAGE, as HE so pleased. But, SURPRISE! Instead, HE was the "thing to manage," as THEY so pleased. And WE can certainly understand the irony of a man, who thought that HE had SO many things, ONLY to discover, **too late**, that his THINGS had HIM? After all, LOOK at all the GADGETS and MACHINES and THINGS that were SUPPOSED to make OUR lives easier and more manageable. I'll tell you: SOME days it seems like I have NO other PURPOSE in life than to TEND to, and CARE for, and TAKE to be FIXED, all the THINGS in my life. WE thought that WE were managing our modern lives with all these GADGETS and THINGS, but it's NOT true! THEY are managing US! And it's all just a MONOLOGUE as WE pat ourselves on the back for our GREAT material SUCCESS and our medical and technological MIRACLES, our great work as A+ parents and our high SAT scores, our homes and jobs, our health and buff bodies. Because JUST when we get it ALL fenced in and secured, locked up and INSURED, there comes that VOICE again, that INTRUSIVE voice, which is GOD'S. And it's the VOICE of REALITY, and it SAYS to us: *the THINGS you have prepared, WHOSE will they be?* And this VOICE may seem DARK and INTRUSIVE and SOMBER, but it's REAL. And it HAUNTS us!

When we were in MEXICO, we met one of my HEROES, Patty Coleman. She and her husband, Bill, became HEROES of mine back in 2001, when I met them for the FIRST time in Mexico. Well, Bill has since DIED, but I STILL keep his PICTURE in my office. They're a couple who went on one of the trips WE just came BACK from, but when they saw and MET the Mexican POOR, they KNEW they had to RESPOND. SO, they SOLD their house in Weston, Vermont and MOVED to Cuernavaca, Mexico. They didn't even know the LANGUAGE. Over time, they LEARNED the language and build BONDS with the POOR there. They LISTENED to find out the NEEDS of the poor, and ASKED them what they needed. And THEN, they became an organization called VAMOS! And for over 20 years, VAMOS has been serving the needs of the Mexican poor. They now have 90+ programs for people of ALL ages and needs in and around Cuernavaca. And it's a WONDERFUL organization, that does not use ONE dime for overhead and advertising, but gives EVERY penny to meet the NEEDS of the Mexican POOR.

Well, on my FIRST trip to Mexico, Bill and Patty made a COMMENT that I have STRUGGLED with a LOT through the years. Now, REALIZE that they are FROM the United States. HE came from WATERBURY, Connecticut, and SHE was Southern Belle. And they have children in MYSTIC, Connecticut and North Carolina. However, when I first MET them, they had been LIVING in MEXICO, working with the POOREST of the POOR, for about 15 years. And SHE said to us: *you know, when we go home, we are ASTOUNDED by the conversations that we hear from U.S. people about how UNHAPPY they are, what DRUGS they're on, and what PSYCHOTHERAPISTS they're seeing. WE, in the United States, have become SO individualistic. The U.S. system PROMOTES that. The family structure of the Mexican STREET CHILDREN is in MUCH better shape, in many ways, than the family structure in the United States. And the POOR are HAPPY, even though they are poor, while people in the United States, who HAVE EVERYTHING, just go ON and ON with their LITANY of UNHAPPINESS. We're just NOT happy people. And BEING with the POOR forces us to take a LOOK at ourselves. And that's REALLY important.*

And friends, Diane and I have found that to be TRUE as well. The Mexican POOR are VERY happy people, in SPITE of their POVERTY, and I'll tell you: their POVERTY is just MISERABLE! They have absolutely TERRIBLE living conditions! But YET, they are genuinely HAPPY people. And so, EVERY time I go to MEXICO (OR Ecuador – it's the SAME with poor THERE), I find myself PONDERING the question: *WHAT do these people KNOW that we DON'T know?* And I THINK that I'm scratching the surface of an ANSWER. I THINK it has to do with NOT trying to MANAGE their MIRACLES, as WE do. You see: THEY do NOT use the words *I, ME* and *MINE*, as WE do all the time. THEY do NOT think that they have to be IN CONTROL all the time, as WE do. And THEY are not CONTROLLED by their THINGS, as WE are. Instead, they seem to be able to receive WHATEVER they are GIVEN as a GIFT, as a BLESSING, as a MIRACLE to be SHARED. You see: for the Mexican poor, it's not ABOUT ME; it's about WE! One VERY poor, OLD woman, who WALKS a couple miles EVERY morning a buys a FEW vegetables and pieces of fruit and then SELLS them outside her door, said to us: *When I share my food, it actually TASTES better. I find that IF I do NOT share it, it does not TASTE good. Some days we may only have one EGG for FIVE of us, but we SHARE it.* And friends, believe it or not, THAT brings her great JOY! It's a wonderful moment of CONTENTMENT for her, when she SHARES that egg, in spite of her EMPTY stomach. You know: maybe we can LEARN to STOP trying to MANAGE our MIRACLES, as if we really have ANY power to DO so anyway, and INSTEAD, just RECEIVE our blessings in the SAME way that the Mexican poor receive THEIRS: with GRATITUDE, with HOSPITALITY and with INCREDIBLE generosity. And I HOPE that we CAN learn THAT, for THAT will make us much HAPPIER people, far more fulfilled people, and give us many MORE moments of great CONTENTMENT. Amen.