

“After We Are Gone”

Luke 12:13-21

Rev. Liz Miller

August 4, 2013

I grew up three hours from Yosemite National Park, but had never visited there until two weeks ago. It is one of the most breathtakingly gorgeous places in the country, and every day that we were there I cried out, “Why did my mom never take me here?!” Yosemite is known for sweeping views of mountain ranges that you can see for miles, incredibly powerful waterfalls, and meadows full of wildflowers and wildlife. One day, we went on a naturalist walk where we learned about the delicate balance between letting the wilderness stay wild, and creating a space that is safe and accessible for people like us to visit. This is a big topic in Yosemite right now, and they are in the middle of a restoration plan to strike a new balance between preservation and enjoyment. This plan will address traffic congestion, and restore some areas to their previously natural state, but will also limit some of the free access that we are used to—there might be a cap on visitors in the park over certain time periods, and even more hiking trails might have permit restrictions. It has sparked a lot of debate—it made it all the way to the New York Times this week.

One of the major areas that is covered in the plan is forest fires. For over a hundred years, ever since European settlers first ventured into Yosemite, we have tried our best to put out any fires that were started in the forest. Fire was seen as unequivocally bad, and unwanted. We all know Smokey the Bear. He taught us well. It wasn't until 1970 that we realized that the lack of forest fires were slowly destroying Yosemite. Without naturally started fires, the old branches, and duff—leaves and pine needles—thickly covers and consumes the floor of the forest. When it is covered, seeds from the trees

have a harder time reaching the soil and becoming new trees. Fire helps control insect populations that damage trees and plants. Even large animal ecosystems, the part I was worried about the most, ultimately benefit from forest fires. It has been found that there are more and better food options for deer after a fire, and bird populations increase. Since 1970 they have been slowly reintroducing controlled burns back into Yosemite, but we are still trying to undo the damage that had built up.

The experts find themselves at odds with the biggest reason we tried to eliminate fires: us. The element that is most at risk when there is a natural forest fire is humans. We have no defense against it, our firefighters are too often harmed when we try to contain it, and it is our buildings and settlements that are destroyed by fire. In a place like Yosemite, a place that has 4 million visitors every year, on one hand, fire can be a very dangerous thing, and on the other, it is necessary to preserve the very place we want to visit.

The Yosemite restoration plan will strive to find that balance between allowing nature to thrive, and allowing us to enjoy a very special place. It will also mean that, due to controlled burns, there might be times, even peak summer times, when the favorite spots in Yosemite will not be open to the public. It will mean that there will be weeks when people come looking for a magnificent view, and instead they will see smoke cloaking Half Dome and the distant mountain peaks. Already, when we were there, we could see smoke in the distance from a recent, still burning, lightning fire, and saw warnings for bad air quality for hikers. The proposed plan means that we will have to give up a part of something that wasn't really ours to begin with. If we don't, we're in danger of being the rich fool that Jesus spoke of in his parable.

In the parable of the rich fool who is admonished by God, God is not mad at the man for being wealthy; he is mad at how self-centered he is about his wealth. The rich man says, "I," "me," or "my" 11 times in three sentences. That is a bit excessive. God takes issue with it being all about himself—his wealth, his grain, his enjoyment. I know we're not supposed to like the rich man, and we're supposed to learn our lesson from him, but there is a part of me that understands his impulse. Anxiety about how we

are going to provide for ourselves throughout our whole lives is a very real concern. We may not stockpile barns of grain, but we are told that to be responsible we need to stockpile money so that we can live comfortably in retirement on our savings. It is the mature thing to do, after all. And it really is. My mom may not have taken me to Yosemite as a kid, but she taught me the importance of savings before I even had a dollar to save. We are also consumed with enjoyment. People make their living off of helping others find happiness and joy. Many of us worry we don't have enough of it, and constantly seek new ways to attain the right amount of happiness.

It's only important up to a point. And that point, which is missing in the parable, is balance between self and other, between self congratulations and gratitude to God. It's not all about us. Fortunes and riches and savings and other pleasures are good, but so is recognizing where those came from. So is keeping in perspective all that we have, and all that others don't have. It's about balance. This parable is teaching us that if we accumulate all the riches in the world and we think of only ourselves, we still don't have everything. We still haven't figured it out. God reminds the man, "After you are gone, who will own your grain? Who will have all your riches? Not you. You will be left with me, and I will be taking note of how you lived, and what you did with what you earned."

There is another story in the Bible that is similar to this one. In the book of Daniel, King Nebuchadnezzar brags about his strength and power and wealth. He believes that he has become so powerful he is the one ruling over the earth. So God teaches this King a lesson and sends him away from his kingdom, into the wilderness, where his hair grows long and unruly, and his nails grow into long talons, and his clothes are torn—until no one can recognize him. He lives alone like an animal, living off the land, eating grass and berries. Eventually, God restores King Nebuchadnezzar to his normal self and to head of the kingdom, and after this crazy experience, the king says, "I lifted my eyes to heaven, and my reason returned to me." That's a great line. "My reason returned to me." It doesn't mean he can't be king, but he remembers it's about more than him. He is one part of a larger world, and that God is woven through it all. He is reasonable; he is balanced.

God is saying, to the rich fool and to King Nebuchadnezzar, you can have your riches, you can be wealthy, you can be happy, you can enjoy life. But remember that is not everything, and that you are one part of a larger story, a story you have very little control or say over. Remember where your wealth and your happiness comes from, and where it will return to after your life is over.

These stories aren't so different from the story that is taking place in Yosemite today. If we only think about how we can make Yosemite a place for us to enjoy, we will destroy it. Even if we think about our children or grandchildren, we still be hurting the forest. At a certain point, it's not about us. There has to be a balance—a balance where we understand that the needs of the wilderness will at times trump our desires to enjoy it.

I'm telling this story because it is something that is a struggle. When we talk about in theory, it seems to make a lot of sense. Why wouldn't we protect the park? Why wouldn't we do anything we could to preserve it? The question is being asked nationally is: should we be considering similar plans at other National Parks? This has sparked a widespread debate because while it is good in theory, people will really be impacted. We take for granted how easy it is to drive into a beautiful place, go for a hike, or swim in a lake. We assume that these places are for us to enjoy, and the more beautiful they are, the more we feel compelled to visit them. Even by designating certain places as National Parks, we are placing them in the care of the government, indicating that we believe our officials can do the best management and maintenance of the wilderness. The message seems to be that we know better than nature itself, that we are better managers.

I love National Parks. I am a National Park junky. I am 29 years old and I am still a Junior Ranger. It's one of the nerdiest things I will ever reveal about myself. Last week alone I earned Junior Ranger badges from four different parks. Part of my love hinges on being able to visit the parks and see the places I have spent time reading about and the history I have learned. After all, the Junior Ranger motto is “Explore, Learn, Protect.” It starts with exploration. When we were talking with the naturalist, she said that the area we were in had originally been scheduled to be closed because of a planned fire,

but that a shift in the weather patterns made them hold off. She showed us how desperately that area needed a burn, all of the piled up evidence, and how it was actually in more danger of an out-of-control fire because they have held off for so long. But when she was saying this, and we were actually standing there, all I could think was, “I’m so glad we get to be here. I know it’s good for the earth, but I’m so glad it wasn’t this week.”

I can understand the need for balance, and I can logically understand that it isn’t all about me, but still...It’s really hard to give that up. It makes me relate to that rich fool. It’s a parable that strikes a cord when we hear it because as easy as it is to *know* that our riches—be they financial or the riches of the natural world that surround us—are not really our riches, it’s harder to *live* with it. This week, with this parable, there are no new answers. We already know the right answers. This week, and with this parable, it’s about how we live, and it’s that continuing quest to seek balance. Balance between us, and the other, whether the other is our neighbor, or God, or a grove of giant trees across the country. At the end of the day, and at the end of our lives, it’s not all about us, after all.