

November 25, 2020 – Deuteronomy 26:1-11 & Luke 12:13-21

Historically, America has been a prosperous nation. Partly, that's because of this land on which live. When the first settlers came to North America, they were absolutely overwhelmed by the natural resources available to them. Wood and metal and fertile fields and diverse wildlife.

When the Plymouth Pilgrims celebrated that first Thanksgiving, it was a three day feast of turkey, duck, goose, and venison, vegetables from their fields and freshly harvested corn. The first year after they landed had been brutally hard, and over half the colony died. But once they could make use of the rich land they lived upon, they found it provided for them abundantly.

America has been prosperous in our civic affairs as well. Our early leaders were generally wise and prudent. They knew a strong nation began with a strong system of government. They were not perfect men, but by and large they sought the greater good over their own personal power or riches. And that has resulted in a remarkable history of stability.

We are a prosperous nation. And we have grown accustomed to seeing Thanksgiving as a time to give thanks for our prosperity. The prosperity of our land. The prosperity of our government and economy. Year after year, we come to the fourth Thursday in November with a laundry list of things to be thankful for. It's even become the habit of many – like my wife – to go onto social media and do 30 days of thanksgiving. Choosing not just one thing, but thirty things to give thanks for.

But this year, we come to Thanksgiving with a slightly different perspective. This year, we come to Thanksgiving with a far more somber tone. Oh, we are still a prosperous nation, don't get me wrong. We still have a laundry list of things to be thankful for. Our land is still abundant. Our government is still relatively stable. Our economy is still one of the best in the world.

But we also have some less prosperous things on our minds. The fear of a deadly disease. The loss of many, many jobs. A turbulent election and a painfully divided society, wracked by injustice and protest. And maybe most of all, the isolation we are all told to endure for the sake our health and the health of our loved ones.

It makes you feel a lot less prosperous, doesn't it? As if, for the first time we have a shorter list of things to be thankful for. And that's a strange feeling for Americans.

And yet, I wonder if there isn't a lesson here for us, as Christians. An important lesson on the nature of prosperity and thankfulness. It's, in fact, a very old lesson as well. One that Jesus himself teaches to his disciples in our Gospel lesson today.

He tells us the parable of a rich man who owns a farm. Nothing unusual there. We've got many farmers in our congregation. They may not consider themselves to be “rich”, but I guarantee you they're probably richer than most farmers around the world today. As are all of us.

So this rich farmer looks at his fields and realizes that he is going to have an absolutely massive grain harvest. His best harvest ever. Big enough that it will overwhelm his current storage capacity.

Thus, he does what just about any of us in his position would do: he builds more storage before the harvest comes. He tears down his small barns and builds larger ones in their place. When the harvest comes in, he's got space to store it all.

And he's very happy with all this. After all, he's prosperous. And that's a good thing. In fact, he looks at how well this harvest has gone and says, “I've got enough here to stop farming and retire. I've got ample goods laid up for many years to come. I can relax, eat, drink, and be merry for the rest of my life.”

Honestly, I think this might be for us the most relatable parable that Jesus ever tells. Because we can all put ourselves in this farmer's shoes. This is the American Dream in a nutshell. Work hard. Be prosperous. Store up your wealth. And then retire and relax. How many of us look at this story and say, "That is exactly what I want my life to be."

And yet, God doesn't praise this man for his hard work. Or congratulate him for his prosperity. Or reward him with a relaxing retirement.

No, God condemns him with one of the harshest labels that He can place on any person: Fool. This rich farmer isn't wise. He isn't prudent. He isn't praiseworthy. He's a fool. And trust me when I say that if God calls you a fool, you have seriously messed up. It's a term he doesn't throw out lightly.

So why is this man a fool? Is it because he's not thankful? Well, that's part of it. He certainly doesn't bring God into equation much. Look at what he says:

*"I will do this: I will tear 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..."* I, I, I. Me, me, me. This was his hard work that produced his prosperous harvest and now he will enjoy his relaxing retirement. And thanking God for His provision is no where to be seen in this.

And that is absolutely a problem. It's the same problem, really, that Moses is addressing in our Old Testament Lesson. The sinfulness of the Israelites after they enter the Promised Land. That will inevitably lead them into ingratitude for all that God has given them. For all that God did to rescue them from Egypt. For all that God did to bring them into this good land.

Such that they have to be commanded to have a festival after their very first harvest. Because God knows that, in less than a year's time, they will forget about his goodness to them. They will do exactly as the man in the parable did: look at their harvest and see nothing but dollar signs and luxury.

So that's the first problem: covetousness and ingratitude. But there's a deeper problem at work here as well. Look at what God says to the man after all this prosperity: *"Fool! This night your soul is required of you, and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?"*

Now, I think we have a natural inclination to think, "Oh, God is punishing the man. Striking him dead for his greed and lack of thanks." But that's not actually what it says. Nothing in this verse indicates that God is angry. Nothing in this verse indicates that this man's death is a special punishment for him.

Rather, God simply says that this man is a fool, because tonight he's going to die. As we all do. And then what will come of all this prosperity? What will happen to this great farm he has built? What will come of the grain he has stored? What merriment will he enjoy from all those goods he had laid up for himself? He can't take it with him. You can't take it with you.

Luther tells us in the Small Catechism that God gives us "clothing and shoes, food and drink, house and home, wife and children, land, animals, and all I have. He richly and daily provides me with all that I need to support this body and life." And for these things "it is my duty to thank and praise, serve and obey Him." This is most certainly true.

But he doesn't stop there. Because I am also "a lost and condemned person" living in a lost and condemned world. Where clothing and shoes wear out. Food and drink run dry. House and home can be destroyed. Wife, children, land, and animals will all perish. And everything I need to support this body and life may not be enough to save me from this pandemic.

And so my hope is not in these physical gifts of God, as great as they are. No, my hope is in “Jesus Christ, true God, begotten of the Father from eternity, and also true man, born of the Virgin Mary.” For he is my Lord, “who has redeemed me, a lost and condemned person, purchased and won me from all sins, from death, and from the power of the devil.”

My prosperity is not in abundant crops, good government, or a stable economy. My treasure is not in gold or silver, but in “His holy, precious blood and His innocent suffering and death, that I may be His own and live under Him in His kingdom and serve Him in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness, just as He is risen from the dead, lives and reigns to all eternity.” We are fools to lay up treasure for ourselves, without being rich in faith toward the God who became man, died, and rose again to save us.

Truth be told, we are not a prosperous nation. Not in the things of God. We are an impoverished nation, starving for his Word. Which is why it is so important that today He feeds us from His table of mercy. He gives us something to be truly thankful for. A prosperity that no pandemic can take away. The forgiveness of sins that we take with us even into death. And which stays with us unto eternal life. Amen.