

Building bigger closets: Ecclesiastes 1:2, 12-14; 2:18-23; Luke 12:13-21

by [Martha P. Sterne](#) in the [July 15, 1998](#) issue

We are building a house. I have noticed that there is some instinctual urge in empty nesters to do that. My husband and I are mesmerized by this project--reading books and doing Internet searches.

Every time I go through the checkout line at the grocery store I succumb to the siren song of the magazine rack and buy another five-dollar slick-looking publication to join the magazines already stockpiled. At night, when I can't sleep, I flip through the magazines and wallow in the pictures of happy homeowners cooking like mad (but elegantly) in the perfect kitchen or musing in the perfect study or enjoying wholesome activities in the perfect living room or graciously entertaining casts of thousands all over the blooming perfect place.

In the magazines, they have perfect closets. I flip through pages in the closet sections and my heart sings. Ah, to be the queen of closets the size of small countries! To be the mistress of ample storage with order and room for everything, like stuff I need but just not right this minute or maybe not this decade. Take mason jars, for instance. I have always wanted to be the kind of person who puts up preserves and pickles and jellies. Maybe buying mason jars and storing them will get me going.

I pore over the magazines in the small hours of the night and think, "I will do this. I will build this house with all these closets and store all my goods. And then I will say to my soul, 'Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.'" And then I put down my magazines and drift off to sleep. I have enough for today, and maybe once I have my closets worked out, I'll stop worrying about tomorrow.

And surely worrying about tomorrow is what keeps most of us awake, flipping magazines and popping pills and surfing the net. We know that no matter the abundance of today, there are endless, potentially dire possibilities for tomorrow. In a time of plenty, say, when the stock market is going gangbusters and unemployment is low and the national budget is in surplus for the first time in

years--in a time of abundance, one needs to look ahead.

I remember how the treasurer of the parish I served in Atlanta would stare dolefully at the parish figures for the year, even in a year of abundance, and say "Well--OK, maybe it's not time to worry yet. But I think it's definitely time to start getting ready to worry."

For some of us it is always time to start getting ready to worry. We generate energy by shifting anxiety from the present to the future. So what else is new?

There was an anxious fellow in the crowd about 2000 years ago. He was consumed by the worry that he was not getting as much as his brother. Of course we are too. How many families have you seen blow up over who gets what? Cain, Abel? Jacob, Esau? Joseph?

At any rate, the biblical fellow is worried about his life, his security. He comes to Jesus for justice and has faith that Jesus has the power to help him. So far, so good. We stand there with him. We too want Daddy's stocks in our bank boxes, the family pieces in our attics, the silver for the silver chest, and the lace tablecloths in the linen closet. And we don't like it when one sibling gets more than another.

The worried guy asks for justice. He waits for the answer, and we wait too. We all look at Jesus' face and slowly get the sinking feeling that Jesus just isn't very interested. These security issues that are very upsetting to us--such as fair inheritance--just do not mean a hill of beans to Jesus.

Evidently the kingdom of heaven does not have a small-claims court. Or a probate judge. Jesus is exasperated. "Who made me divider over you?" Instead of remedying the situation, he tells about the rich man who builds barns to store his abundant harvest, tells his soul to relax, eat, drink and be merry--and then drops dead.

We gape at the teller of the tale. "Oh," the worried guy says. Jesus looks at him, at us. "So it is with those who store up treasure for themselves but are not rich toward God."

I glance at my magazines--books in the bible of a culture that considers the accumulation and protection of abundance to be deadly serious, worth the efforts of a lifetime. The magazines effectively market the security for which we all yearn. We strive to build bigger barns every way we can, but what barn can we trust finally?

How big is the bank deposit box you need for your soul's sake? Can you rent a storage unit to hoard abundant life? What kind of insulation will ward off the chill of whatever is coming? Should we get a security system to warn of the inevitable? Will even a steel door lock out the end?

Even in our biggest, deepest closet, we cannot store life. We cannot lock out death. We and our closets float on the *Titanic*, and we know deep down how the trip always ends. Our endless dilemma is that all our wisdom, all our work, all the days of vexation, all the restless nights--none of it can store life. Nothing can lock out death. Perhaps, as the teacher in Ecclesiastes says, the whole human endeavor comes down to vanity and a chasing after wind.

Or does it? Is death the last word?

Help us, God, to look up from our house plans and stock quotes and even our church budgets. Help us to listen for the word that refuses to be market-driven. Help us to listen for the Voice who can lead us not into another closed closet but into abundant life. Help us turn, with all the richness of our very being, to you. And live.