

Sunday, August 4, 2013: Luke 12:13-21

by [Rhonda Mawhood Lee](#) in the [July 24, 2013](#) issue

Ken Pyle was in his final year at Louisville's Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in 1966 when he met Sheila. She drove up to a barbecue in her '64 convertible with her dark hair flowing and her guitar in hand—and Ken was smitten. But as Sheila was divorced with two young sons, she was not the sort of wife that Ken's denomination had in mind for him. After the couple had dated a few months, Ken's board of deacons gave him a year to choose: he could marry this divorced woman or be ordained. Ken married Sheila and put his future in the church behind him.

Ken was out of a job but not out of a church. Following Sheila's lead he was confirmed in the Episcopal Church and grew to appreciate the Anglican grounding in scripture, tradition and reason. Besides, Sheila had been known to tell her fiancé—with a wink—that in the Episcopal Church “we could smoke, drink and dance.”

That preference for openness, along with Ken's firm Baptist belief in the priesthood of all believers and his desire to serve Christ, led him and his wife to their true vocation: hospitality. Soon after their marriage they opened a bar and performance space called the Storefront Congregation. Ken's chaplaincy training had included a stint at Rikers Island, an experience that served him well in his new role as bartender, as he and Sheila received anyone who would drink and converse peaceably. The Storefront Congregation quickly distinguished itself as open to people of all races and—equally rare in the 1960s—to women unescorted by men. Sheila laughingly remembers being targeted for allegedly flying the Vietnamese flag, which their critics didn't recognize as the Texas state flag (flown alongside the American and Kentucky flags out of loyalty to their birthplaces). They developed a reputation as radicals, but they didn't see themselves that way. They wanted to create a gathering space where Jesus might show up and would be welcomed if he did.

Later Sheila and Ken opened the Rudyard Kipling in Old Louisville, and their mission continued. The name of their new bar was inspired by Kipling's poem “The Mother Lodge,” which celebrates a pub in colonial India where “soldiers, Muslims, Hindus,

Irish and every variety of men chatted and smiled and viewed each other with warmth and respect.” The Rud, as it is affectionately known, is an outpost of that hoped-for community and is operated by Christians committed to claiming territory for the kingdom while awaiting its full realization.

In their ministry of hospitality Ken and Sheila have discovered new meaning in Jesus’ warning to “be on your guard against all kinds of greed” and to remember that “life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.” The Rudyard Kipling is a for-profit endeavor, but creating community has always been more important to Sheila and Ken than having money or position.

Unlike the man in this week’s gospel reading, Ken didn’t ask God or anyone else to adjudicate his conflict with the church when he had to choose between ordination and marriage. Nor did he mistake the church’s decision for God’s final word on his vocation. Ken and Sheila chose a third, more faithful path. Instead of building a spiritual barn filled with power and authority or seeking to pile up worldly goods, they chose to follow their Spirit-filled hearts into an unconventional lay ministry. They focused on weaving relationships based on mutual openness and vulnerability instead of striving for some security of title or property—the kind of riches, Jesus warns, that easily turns us into fools.

Bartending ministers like Ken and Sheila appeared foolish to many in the 1960s. They may seem wiser today, when mainline churches are realizing that they own too many buildings for their dwindling numbers and when ordination no longer carries a promise of lifelong employment.

Ken and Sheila’s story suggests questions that Jesus might ask his 21st-century disciples. What kinds of treasure have our churches stored up, and what structures—physical and administrative—have we built to hold them? Is it time to tear some down, sell others to make new investments and find new uses for those we keep? What might rich churches learn from small missions, and what breathing room might struggling churches gain if we found ways to pool staff, share clergy and pray and study together?

There is no single answer to any of these questions. Every community fashions its own golden calves and each has gifts to offer. But Jesus calls all of us to discern between the treasures we have stored up for ourselves and the riches we find in God. If we find it hard to tell the difference, the parable of the rich fool offers a warning. If our dearest treasure can be bought or sold, if it must be kept under lock

and key, it almost certainly means more to us than to the Lord.