

August 4, Ordinary 18C (Luke 12:13-21)

## **This is a funny story. We laugh. But we're laughing at ourselves.**

by [Cynthia Briggs Kittredge](#) in the [July 17, 2019](#) issue

The late comedian George Carlin had a reputation for profanity, but his stand-up performances were also characterized by brilliant social satire and an acute sense of the power of language to create and to distort reality. Humor, exaggeration, and mockery work together as a contemporary technique—as well as an ancient one—for insight and moral instruction.

In one monologue, Carlin depicts the obsessive accumulation of material things, and the modern anxiety for which it is both the cause and the result:

You got your stuff with you? I'll bet you do. Guys have stuff in their pockets; women have stuff in their purses. . . . Stuff is important. You gotta take care of your stuff. You gotta have a place for your stuff. That's what life is all about, tryin' to find a place for your stuff! That's all your house is; a place to keep your stuff. If you didn't have so much stuff, you wouldn't need a house. You could just walk around all the time.

A house is just a pile of stuff with a cover on it. You can see that when you're taking off in an airplane. You look down and see all the little piles of stuff. Everybody's got his own little pile of stuff.

Jesus' parable in this week's reading from Luke is usually known as "The Rich Fool." It could be titled "Bigger Barns" or even "A Place for Your Stuff." Like Carlin's monologue, the parable portrays a situation of tragic absurdity.

Jesus, responding to a request for financial advice from a person in the crowd, prefaces the parable with a warning against greed, which ancient philosophers believed to be a form of depravity and a lack of self-control. Then he offers a saying that the NRSV translates as "One's life does not consist in the abundance of

possessions.” The word *life* occurs three times in this passage (the Greek word *zoe* in verse 15 and *psyche* in verses 19 and 20); it is the subject of both this passage and the next one (“Do not worry about your life” in verse 22).

The parable features two characters: along with the rich man, God makes a rare parabolic appearance here. As in the parables of the prodigal son and the unjust judge, the technique of inner monologue gives us insight into the man’s character by letting us overhear his reasoning. A storage issue about space becomes also a preservation issue about time: “What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?” The rich man’s logical but costly solution? “I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods.”

This is a funny story. As Carlin puts it, going on:

So now you got a houseful of stuff. And, even though you might like your house, you gotta move. Gotta get a bigger house. Why? Too much stuff! And that means you gotta move all your stuff. Or maybe, put some of your stuff in storage. Storage! Imagine that. There’s a whole industry based on keepin’ an eye on other people’s stuff.

At this point the rich man’s selfish strategy evokes scorn and superiority. But with the next revelation we begin not only to question his judgment but also to be slightly nervous on his behalf: “And I will say to my soul, ‘Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.’”

So the issue of time is about anxiety, the fear of running out—and the higher-capacity barns will provide the security that will allow his soul to “relax.” Indeed, today there is a storage industry and an anxiety industry and a decluttering industry, all directed toward making it possible for us to relax, eat, drink, and be merry.

The space-and-time problem becomes moot as God informs him that his life is over and he won’t be keeping his stuff. No euphemisms, no gentleness: “You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?”

We can see instantly how fervent but misguided is the rich man’s logic. We laugh. As with Carlin’s monologue, we are laughing at ourselves—pockets, purses, houses, no end to it all. But when the rich man gets his bad news, it dawns upon us that we may

be the fools, carrying, covering, locking up our stuff, staving off death. Perhaps this practice of acquiring and consuming, building and storing, only increases the idiocy and intensifies the fear. Jesus and George Carlin use the same rhetorical strategy to jolt us out of our insanity. Maybe life isn't about "tryin' to find a place for your stuff." Maybe it's not about your abundance of possessions. There could be an alternative—just walking around all the time, winging as the ravens, blooming as the lilies, rich toward God.