

July 31, Ordinary 18C (Luke 12:13-21)

The lilies of the field don't have student loans.

by [Jessica Mesman](#) in the [July 13, 2022](#) issue

Rembrandt painted the rich fool. He sits alone in the darkness, surrounded by piles of books, and examines a single coin. The books are an indication of his great wealth, but the mood of the painting is impoverished. There is something sad about him sitting there in the dim light, absorbed in the study of his wealth, searching the coin as if it will reveal some new meaning.

I've been anxious about money for most of my life. Lately, I feel like I think of little else. To be clear: I'm not currently in crisis. I'm just afraid I will be. A serious illness, the resumption of student loan payments, car trouble—any of these might blow down my barn. I feel a little like the old man in Rembrandt's painting, but instead I'm wearily staring at my bank balance, willing it to grow.

Jesus is straightforward about the dangers of wealth. "Be on guard against all kinds of greed," he warns his interlocutor, who has inspired this lesson by asking Jesus, of all people, to arbitrate a dispute over an inheritance. Jesus responds by telling the story of the rich fool, a man who literally has more than he knows what to do with. We gather from the man's repetition of first-person pronouns—and from the fact that he's talking to himself—that he is somewhat isolated, or possibly that he thinks he alone is wise enough to solve his rich-man problems. He doesn't pray about it, either. In the end he decides to build bigger barns to hold all his stuff, and then God lowers the curtain on the whole drama by demanding the rich man's life.

There are a few warnings here. We could point to the spiritual dangers of the rich man becoming estranged from his community, taking inordinate satisfaction in his own wealth and accomplishments and hoarding his resources. We have any number of pop culture referents, tech billionaires, and fallen megachurch pastors to look to for object lessons.

Estrangement from others and God, not from wealth, seems to be his downfall. The more distant the rich fool becomes from the experiences of those who are unlike

him, the less he appreciates what their lives are like and what they need to thrive. The fool loses all sense of perspective. I think of the wealthy matriarch Lucille Bluth in *Arrested Development*, who says to her son, “It’s one banana, Michael. What could it cost, ten dollars?” There are plenty of people who don’t realize how many in their communities live in poverty or adjacent to it. That naïveté is surely spiritually dangerous. Maybe if the fool had been richer in relationships, he might have figured out how to be “rich toward God.”

It’s easy for me to smugly apply that spiritual wisdom to the rich. But can I find a lesson in it for myself? Rich relationships I have. They don’t pay the bills.

Growing up, my parents were always stressed about money. I remember my mom joking that her checkbook was made of rubber. But that wasn’t unusual in our community. It wasn’t until I went to college that I met people who had more than enough. I remember going to a new friend’s childhood home and being astonished—I think my jaw actually dropped. I kept commenting on how beautiful it was. She seemed mystified and a little embarrassed. I cringe when I think of this now. I should have acted unimpressed. She would never have known I didn’t belong.

It took me a while to realize that by going to college I had entered a new community, one in which many of the people I met didn’t seem to think much about money at all and in which it was gauche to bring it up. One of the ways con artist Anna Sorokin convinced the wealthiest people in New York society that she was a German heiress named Anna Delvey was to be nonchalant with and around vast sums of money. She gave \$100 tips to bellhops, but she’d also stiff you for an expensive dinner, hotel bill, or trip to Morocco. She even managed to steal a private plane.

Half the game was to pretend you belonged there. There was no reason to be anxious and petty about something as tedious as money. There are times when her dialogue in *Inventing Anna*, the miniseries based on her story, sounds a lot like the words of the rich fool: *You have ample goods laid up for many years! Relax, eat, drink, be merry!* Until she is arrested and charged with grand larceny.

Jesus isn’t speaking to the rich fool. The surrounding texts are about anxiety, and the rich fool is oblivious. Jesus is speaking to the Anna Sorokins, and to the brother asking for help trying to get his piece of the pie, and to me: *Be on guard against all kinds of greed.* Including the kind of greed that makes one obsess over the coin in one’s hand so much that we begin to assign our own value to it. When all I think

about is money or the lack of it, I forget that it's not who I am. I begin to feel worthless. I may act like the fool from exhaustion, envy, the fear of scarcity, or even spite.

I used to think the surrounding text in Luke was cold comfort. The lilies of the field don't have student loans. I read it now with more tenderness, thinking of a God who sees my anxiety, numbering the hairs on my head as I refresh my bank's web page again in the dim light of my desk lamp. Whatever I have stored in the barn, my life is worth more than this.