

First Congregational United Church of Christ, Appleton

August 3, 2025

Pastor Katherine Willis Pershey

Luke 12:13-21, *The Bad Conversation*

Last Sunday, Pastor Nick's sermon began with a story – he and his puppy Autumn, getting caught in an unexpected rainstorm while swimming in a pond together. The story was emblematic of his preaching because it was vividly crafted, rooted in God's Creation, and ushered us into a deeper understanding of the gospel through metaphor.

And – bonus points – it featured one of his beloved poodles. After worship, my mom told me she got the giggles trying to imagine me swimming with my ridiculous, sweet, poorly trained, aging rescue dog. Let's just say any anecdote featuring me in a pond with Betsy would not have the same dignity. Whatever sermon illustration that would come out of it would be embarrassing for all parties involved. Maybe even Jesus. This is why it is good that you have co-pastors. We know our place.

I say this because I am afraid I am about to offer up something that is terribly emblematic of Pastor Katherine's preaching. It is so boring compared to the swimming with the puppy story I feel like I should reassure you that yes, the sermon will be on the shorter side today since we have both a baptism and Communion in this worship service. I just feel like it is imperative to point out that while there are only 188 words in this brief reading from the Gospel of Luke, six of them are the word "said" or "say." And then two are the words "told" and "thought." Practically every sentence is hugged by quotation marks. It's all conversations.

It starts when someone in the crowd calls out to Jesus. He's seeking a particular response – he wants Jesus to publicly agree with him about the distribution of the family fortune. Jesus refuses to weigh in. You know you've brought a petty dispute to the table when the one anointed by God to judge the living and the dead declines to hear your case. Instead, Jesus warns against greed and tells a parable. I think this parable should have a name, just like the Good Samaritan and the Prodigal Son. If this parable had a name, it would be the Parable of the Bad Conversation.

Hear it again: *The land of a rich man produced abundantly. And he thought to himself, 'What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?' Then he said, '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. And I will say to my soul, Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.'*

Even though the rich man's bigger barn is full of grain and goods, it functions remarkably well as an echo chamber. As he thinks to himself, talks to himself, and addresses his own soul, the rich man doesn't have to risk encountering anything that would challenge his instincts or dare him to think about anyone but himself.

He's not an inherently bad guy. He didn't swindle anyone out of an inheritance. He didn't mistreat his workers or steal his neighbor's livestock. Truly, he didn't do much of anything at all. He gets cast as a character in a parable because his *land* produced abundantly and he had to figure out what to do with his surplus crops.

He's not an inherently bad guy, but he certainly had an exceptionally bad conversation. As one preacher notes, "There is no thought to using the abundance to help others, no expression of gratitude for his good fortune, no recognition of

God at all. The farmer has fallen prey to worshiping the most popular of gods: the Unholy Trinity of “me, myself, and I.”

We need people. We need people to challenge us to step outside of our barns, no matter what size they might be, and step into the risks and rewards of community. We need people to remind us that everything we have is a gift from God – that there is no such thing as grain and goods that are solely ours, so long as there are people in this world who do not have enough grain and do not have enough goods. We need people to call us away from that Unholy Trinity of me, myself, and I, to worship the God from whom all blessings flow. We need people to remind us that Jesus taught us to be his hands and feet, bringing relief and good news to those in need. We need to say things to people other than ourselves, and we need people to say things in return - sometimes things we do not want to hear.

It must be said that someone else does speak in the parable. One of those six instances of the word “said” is when God says the rich man is a fool. God isn’t wrong. It’s sad, really. The only thing that saves this guy from a long life in his big barn eating, drinking, and muttering to himself is that apparently it’s going to be a short life after all.

The beautiful thing is that Jesus is showing us how we can avoid such foolishness. Jesus is holding up the exact opposite of a bad conversation. He is inviting us into wisdom and generosity. Into richness toward God. He is inviting us to have good conversations – sometimes hard conversations.

This church is going to have hard conversations this fall - but they are going to be good conversations, too. This is not a stewardship and capital campaign sermon, but spoiler alert: this fall we will have a stewardship and capital campaign.

Consider this a teaser. We know that God is doing a new thing in our midst. We can feel it.

We know that we can continue to make this extraordinary campus and grounds more useful, to more people, more of the time– taking the abundant gift of 724 South River Street and sharing it with present and future generations in new and creative ways. And we know that the way to do this is through uncomfortable, sacrificial generosity.

The way to do this is not to have bad conversations with ourselves about how surely the folks with bigger barns and more grain will have it covered.

I recently heard a story from the last capital campaign at First Congregational UCC. A church member was preparing for a meeting with a member of the Capital Campaign committee. She said to her soul, Soul, I will pledge \$500 to the Capital Campaign. And after the member of the Capital Campaign committee left her house, she had pledged \$5,000 to the Capital Campaign. Now that must have been one banger of a conversation. She does not regret her generosity. Rarely do people regret generosity. She laughed and complimented the capital campaigner on that visit, some thirty years ago. She was no fool.

Thanks be to God. Amen.