

“Over-flowing Barns”

Luke 12:13-21

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Rev. Dr. Scott M. Kenefake

Imagine you are visiting a typical American **supermarket**. Not such a big one--and you are looking for salad dressing. A hundred seventy-five salad dressings on average are on offer in this supermarket, if you don't count the 10 extra-virgin olive oils and 12 balsamic vinegars you could buy to make a very large number of your own salad dressings, in the off-chance that none of the 175 the store has on offer that suits you.

So this is what a typical supermarket is like. You've got to admit that's a lot of choice!

In other domains – think about the world of communications. There was a time, when I was much younger (but doesn't seem that long ago!), when you could get any kind of telephone service you wanted, as long as it came from Ma Bell. You rented your phone, you didn't buy it. One consequence of that, by the way, is that the phone never broke. And those days are gone. We now have an almost unlimited variety of phones, especially in the world of cell phones.

And in other aspects of life [that are much more significant than buying things], the same explosion of choice is true. **Health care**. It is no longer the case in the United States that you go to the doctor, and the doctor tells you what to do. Instead, you go to the doctor, and the doctor tells you, *"Well, we could do A, or we could do B. A has these benefits and these risks. B has these benefits and these risks. What do you want to do?"* And you say, *"Doc, what should I do?"* And the doc says, *"A has these benefits and risks, and B has these benefits and risks. What do you want to do?"* And you say, *"If you were me, Doc, what would you do?"* And the doc says, *"But I'm not you."* And the result is -- we call it *"patient autonomy,"* which makes it sound like a good thing, but what it really is a shifting of the burden and the responsibility for decision-making from somebody who knows something -- namely, the doctor -- to somebody who knows nothing and is almost certainly sick and thus, not in the best shape to be making decisions -- namely, the patient.

There is also enormous marketing of *prescription drugs* to people like you and me, which, if you think about it, makes no sense at all, since we can't buy them. Why do they market to us if we can't buy them? The answer is that they expect us to call our doctors the next morning and ask for our prescriptions to be changed.

And then there is **work**. We are blessed with the technology that enables us to work every minute of every day from any place on the planet. What this means, [this incredible freedom of choice we have with respect to work], is that we have to *make a decision*, again and again and again, about whether we should or shouldn't be working.

For example, we can go to watch our kid play soccer, and we have our cell phone on one hip and our tablet on our other hip, and our laptop, presumably, on our laps. And even if they're all shut off, [every minute that we're watching our kid mutilate a soccer game], we are also asking ourselves, "*Should I answer this cell phone call? Should I respond to this email? Should I draft this letter?*" And even if the answer to the question is "*no*," it's certainly going to make the *experience* of your kid's soccer game very different than it would've been. ¹

So everywhere we look, big things and small things, material things and lifestyle things, life is a matter of unending, [often distracting] choice.

And the question is: *Is this good news or bad news?* And the answer is "*yes*."

We all know what's *good* about it, so I'm going to talk about what's *bad* about it. All of this choice has two effects, two negative effects on people. One effect, paradoxically, is that it produces *paralysis* rather than liberation. With so many options to choose from, *people find it very difficult to choose at all*.

And this is exactly what we see in today's Gospel reading from Luke—the parable of the *Rich Fool*.

You see, the issue is not so much investments and dividends as it is *distractions*.

¹ Barry Schwartz, *Ted Talk*, 2005

You may recall in the Lukan Gospel lectionary reading two weeks ago, that Jesus is receiving hospitality from Mary and Martha (the latter apparently doing the heavy lifting with respect to logistics). Martha complains that Mary is not doing her fair share [which is an interesting permutation on the situation that provokes today's parable—someone who asks Jesus to take sides in a dispute regarding fair shares of a family inheritance]. Jesus tells Martha that she is *distracted* by *many things*. In other words, in the press of immediate perceptions, Martha has lost *perspective*. In her multitasking, Martha has *missed out* on her one critically important, vocation-centering obligation.

In a similar way, *both* the man focused on the inheritance *he does not yet have*—but wants to gain—and the rich man focused on resources *he does have* (but wants to enlarge) are afflicted by a variation on Martha's problem—essentially the other side of the same coin.

You see, the disgruntled brother and the enterprising rich man are not distracted by *many things*, as Martha is. Rather, both are distracted by their fixation on *one thing*: the additional resources each might somehow garner [*"If only my brother would divvy up!" "If only my barns were bigger!"*].

When Jesus counsels *"not to worry"* about food and clothes (as he does next), he is not necessarily urging a radically Franciscan lifestyle; he is addressing (rather) *the pervasive human disposition to grub for and grasp after what almost always **distracts** our focus from what can be acquired only through God's gracious gift* (*"Do not be afraid, little flock; it is [God's] good pleasure to give you the kingdom,"* 12:32).

So, the issue (for Martha, the discontented brother, the rich man, and us) is the *careful discernment regarding various dimensions of value*. And such discernment is especially challenging when money is at stake. And it can be even more difficult when the presenting problem involves a *"fair"* distribution of *capital* and *labor*. Perceptions regarding both are often immediate and intense. *Perspective* is essential in discernment—and often hard to come by.²

So, what will it be? French, bleu cheese or ranch?

² David J. Schlafer, *Luke 12:13-21, Feasting on the Word*, Westminster/John Knox, Louisville, 2010, pp. 313, 315,

Another effect of the *tyranny of choice* is that, even if we manage to overcome the *paralysis* and make a choice, we end up *less satisfied* with the result of the choice than we would be if we had fewer options to choose from. And there are several reasons for this.

One of them is, [with a lot of different salad dressings to choose from], if you buy one and it's not perfect -- and what salad dressing is? -- it's easy to imagine that you could've made a different choice that would've been better. And what happens is, this imagined alternative induces you to regret the decision you made, and this regret subtracts from the satisfaction you get out of the decision you made, even if it was a good decision. *The more options there are, the easier it is to regret anything at all that is disappointing about the option that you chose.*

There is also something economists call "*opportunity costs.*" When there are *lots of alternatives to consider*, it's easy to imagine the attractive features of alternatives that you reject that make you *less satisfied* with the alternative that you've chosen.

And *opportunity costs* subtract from the satisfaction that we get out of what we choose, *even when what we choose is terrific.* And the more options there are to consider, the more attractive features of these options are going to be reflected by us as opportunity costs.

[Think houses, relationships, cars, dogs, schools, personal identity, clothes, shoes, restaurants, vacations, etc.].

Think about it: when there are *hundreds of different styles of jeans* available and you buy one that is disappointing and you ask *why, who's responsible*, it is equally clear that the answer to the question is "*you.*" *You could have done better.* With a hundred different kinds of jeans on display, there is no excuse for failure. And so when people make decisions, and even though the results of the decisions are good, *they feel disappointed about them; they blame themselves.*

This is why *clinical depression* has exploded in the industrial world in the last generation. I believe a significant -- not the only, but a significant -- contributor to this explosion of depression is also *suicide*, that people have experiences that are

disappointing because *their standards are so high*, and then when they have to explain these experiences to themselves, they think they're at fault.

So the net result is that *we do better in general, objectively, and we feel worse*.

Of course, the stuff I'm talking about is the peculiar problem of modern, affluent, Western societies. And what is counter-intuitive and so frustrating and infuriating about this is: It's a waste of money; these expensive, complicated choices -- it's not simply that they don't help. They actually hurt. They actually make *us worse off*.

But if enhanced freedom of choice and increased affluence don't enhance well-being, what does? The most important factor seems to be close *social relations*. People who are married, who have good friends, and who are close to their families are happier than those who are not. People who participate in religious communities are happier than those who do not. Being connected to others seems to be more important to well-being than being rich or "keeping your options open."

In the context of this discussion of choice, it is important to note that, in many ways, social ties actually decrease freedom of choice. Marriage, for example, is a commitment to a particular other person that curtails freedom of choice of sexual or emotional partners. Serious friendship also entails weighty responsibilities and obligations that at times may limit one's own freedom. The same is true, obviously, of family. And most religious institutions call on their members to live their lives in a certain way, and to take responsibility for the well-being of their fellow congregants. So, counterintuitive as it may appear, what seems to contribute most to happiness binds us rather than liberates us.

Yet more than a quarter of Americans report being lonely, and loneliness seems to come not from being alone, but from lack of intimacy. We spend less time visiting with neighbors. We spend less time visiting with our parents, and much less time visiting with other relatives. Partly this is because we have less time, since we are busy trying to determine what choices to make in other areas of life. But partly this is because close social relations have themselves become matters of choice. As Robert Lane writes: "What was once given by neighborhood and work now must be achieved; people have had to make their own friends ... and actively cultivate

their own family connections." In other words, our social fabric is no longer a birthright but has become a series of deliberate and demanding choices.³

There is a New Yorker cartoon that depicts a parent goldfish and an offspring in a small goldfish bowl. "You can be anything you want to be—no limits," says the myopic parent, not realizing how limited an existence the fishbowl allows. I'd like to suggest that perhaps the parent is not so myopic. *Freedom within limits, choice within constraints, is indeed liberating.* But if the fishbowl gets shattered—if the constraints disappear—freedom of choice can turn into a tyranny of choice.⁴

Good advice for those distracted by the paralysis and disappointment of too much *choice*; those like Martha, those focused on inheritances, and even those rich focused on too many resources.

³ Barry Schwartz, *The Tyranny of Choice*, God Spy, https://oldarchive.godspy.com/culture/tyranny_of_choice.cfm.htm

⁴ Barry Schwartz is a professor of psychology at Swarthmore College. His new book, *The Paradox of Choice: Why More Is Less*, has just been published by Ecco.