

# Non Sequitur

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Olentangy Christian Reformed Church  
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## **Luke 12:13-21**

*Jesus continued his journey to Jerusalem. On the way, opponents were demanding signs, making accusations, and laying traps, while Jesus was casting out demons, pronouncing judgment, and giving warnings. And crowds of people continued to follow him.*

Someone in the crowd said to [Jesus], “Teacher, tell my brother to split the family property with me.” But [Jesus] said to him, “Who made me your judge or arbiter?” Then he said to [the crowd], “Watch out! Be on your guard against every greedy desire, because life is not about having lots of things.”

Then he told them a parable: “The land of a certain rich man was very fruitful. So he thought to himself, ‘What should I do? I have nowhere to store my harvest.’ Then he said, ‘Here’s what I’ll do: I’ll tear down my storehouses and build bigger ones. And that’s where I’ll store the grain and my other things. Then I’ll say to myself, “Self, you have plenty laid up for many years. Relax, eat, drink, be merry.”’ But God said to him, ‘Fool, tonight you will be asked for your life! Then who’s going to get what you’ve accumulated?’

“That’s how it is with people who gather up their own treasures, but who aren’t rich toward God.”

## **Children’s Story**

One day Sammy the Squirrel’s dad tried to teach Sammy how to build a squirrel nest. I’m not sure Sammy learned anything that day. I think he had other things on his mind, lots of other things.

First Sammy’s dad said, “Pay attention, Sammy.” Then he showed him how to choose a good spot for a nest, high in the sturdy branches of a red oak tree. After this first part of the lesson, Sammy asked, “Dad, how many acorns fit in our hollow tree?”

Then Sammy’s dad showed him the right kind of branches to use for a nest – not too thick, not too thin, not too stiff, not too flexible. After this second part of the lesson, Sammy asked, “Dad, why do oak leaves turn brown in the winter?”

Next Sammy’s dad showed him how to weave the branches together to make a sturdy nest, and how to reinforce the main opening. After this third part of the lesson, Sammy asked, “Dad, why is the sky blue?”

Finally Sammy’s dad showed him how to fill the spaces between the branches with fresh leaves, how to overlap the leaves on top to keep out the rain, and how to spread the leaves out at the bottom to let fresh air in. After this last part of the lesson, Sammy asked, “Dad, how many squirrels live in the Great Forest?”

Sammy had lots of things on his mind that day. I don’t think he learned anything about building a squirrel nest.

## **Sermon**

*Non sequiturs* can be a blessing. When two friends are discussing politics and the discussion is warming up and tempers are beginning to flare, it’s a relief when a third friend says, “How about those Red Sox?”

Non sequiturs can be frustrating and disruptive. When a teacher is leading a lesson on the speeches of Abraham Lincoln, contrasting the stark simplicity of the Gettysburg Address with the long-winded oration of Gettysburg keynote speaker Edward Everett, highlighting the rhythm and color of Lincoln's words, it's almost crushing when a dreamy-eyed student asks, "Do you think President Bush is cute?"

We preachers are lucky. Sermons tend to be monologues as opposed to audience-participation events, so we don't have to hear the random meanderings (that is, the non sequiturs) that flood congregational minds. That's why we can fool ourselves into thinking that we're all on the same page. But it ain't necessarily so.

**On his way to Jerusalem, Jesus the teacher kept returning to a single theme.** Never mind the glories of the past. Never mind the prophetic ministry of Jonah and the salvation of Nineveh. Never mind the fabled wisdom of Solomon and the visit of the Queen of Sheba.

And never mind the mundane issues of the present. Never mind the unbending rules of hospitality. "Get out of the kitchen, Martha!" Never mind a pharisaic focus on dirty dinner dishes. A little dining room contamination won't be the end of the world. And never mind the duties you have to your dead dad. Let the dead bury the dead.

Never mind the past. Never mind the present. The future is here! "The kingdom of God is at hand," Jesus said. "So seek that kingdom ahead of everything else." That was Jesus's single, unrelenting theme. And, good teacher that he was, he returned to that theme again and again.

**But from the crowd, in the middle of the lesson, came this non sequitur:** "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family property with me." Apparently the lesson hadn't sunk in. Something and someone greater than the past was at hand, greater than Jonah, greater than Solomon.

But the man says, in essence, "Jesus, be my Moses." Moses used to settle disputes for the Israelites. From morning until night, they would bring their cases to Moses, and he would resolve the issues with binding rulings. The man was saying, in effect, "Can we go back in time, back to the glorious days of Moses, with you Jesus as our ruler and judge?"

Not only has the man missed the theme ("Never mind the past, never mind the present, here's the future!"), but his issue is completely out of left field. It has nothing to do with anything Jesus has been saying. It has nothing to do with anything Jesus has been doing. It's a complete distraction. It doesn't fit anywhere in the teacher's lesson plan.

**But Jesus, unperturbed, calmly changes course.** First he says, I'm not going to be your Moses. "Who made me your judge or arbiter?" Then he tells a parable about possessions and greed. Through the parable, he warns about the folly and futility of focusing on piling up possessions. Both the rich man in the parable and the man standing in front of him had the same problem. They were paying too much attention to their possessions.

This wasn't Jesus's main theme, but oh well. Sometimes you have to cover other themes, too. And greed is a good theme. Greed is a form of idolatry, after all, a way of putting trust in something other than God. So Jesus moved over from his main theme to the greed theme. And he gave the man and the whole crowd a valuable lesson. We preachers have been echoing that lesson for centuries. You may remember that I preached a sermon about greed a little more than a year ago. I even used Luke 12 as the text for that sermon. The trouble is, when Luke 12 is the text, focusing on greed misses the point.

**You see, Jesus took that non sequitur from the man in the crowd and redirected it toward his main theme.** Look at the parable. Is the rich man faulted for being rich? No. Is there an intrinsic problem with storing grain properly, with building storehouses for a bumper harvest? No. Doesn't the Bible celebrate Joseph and his wise plan for storing seven years' worth of grain in Egypt? The rich man is a

fool, but not because he's rich, not because he stored his grain, and not because he had a retirement plan ("you have plenty laid up for many years"). He was a fool because he didn't recognize a coming moment of crisis. That moment of crisis was about to overtake him, that night, before he even took a first step to put his plan in to action. He was about to die, and he didn't have a clue.

That was the sort of problem Jesus faced again and again. The critical moment was coming. The dividing line of history was about to be drawn, in Jerusalem, through Jesus's death, resurrection, and ascension and through the sending of the Spirit. With that critical moment approaching, nothing else mattered. Not the Pharisees' focus on keeping religious tradition alive. Not duties owed to dead parents. Not property disputes with stubborn brothers. Not Jonah or Solomon or Moses — someone greater than them all was here! What mattered was repentance, standing on the right side of history's dividing line, standing with Jesus. Jesus, who came to bring division not peace. Jesus, who said, "Whoever isn't with me is against me." Jesus, who said, "Fruitless trees will be cut down." Jesus, who said, "Get rid of everything; the Father is pleased to give you the kingdom!"

The problem, according to Jesus, was simple. Here's how he put it to the crowds that followed him toward Jerusalem: "You can look at the sky and say, 'Looks like rain's coming.' But you don't know how to read the present time." *The kingdom is coming. The kingdom is at hand. The future is now. Forget about living in the past. Forget about a settled and smooth life in the present. A storm is coming, a big storm, big enough to blow the future right into the present. And the only way to ride that storm out is to get in the boat with me. That boat may not look like much, but it isn't about the boat, it's about me!*

Notice how Jesus concludes his encounter with the man in the crowd. He says, "That's how it is with people who gather up their own treasures, but who aren't rich toward God." Or it could be put differently: "That's how it is with people who gather up their own treasures, but who don't treasure what God is doing." That is, who don't treasure what God is doing in Jesus. Nothing mattered at that moment except what God was doing through Jesus. That was the point of the parable. That was the focus of Jesus's conversation with the man in the crowd. That was Jesus's main theme throughout his journey to Jerusalem. Nothing mattered except what God was doing through Jesus. That was the theme.

**And that theme confronts and challenges us today.** Of course, that brings up some critical questions. First, what is God doing through Jesus today? We should probably say "through Jesus and the Spirit." Maybe we should say, "through Jesus and the Spirit and the church," since the church is the body of Christ in which the Spirit dwells. What is God doing today? That's the first question. A second and related question is, how can we see, how can we recognize what God is doing today? A third question is, what are we prepared to do in response to what God is doing? Are we prepared to step across the dividing line and to stand with Jesus? A fourth and related question is this: Are we now in the midst of, or approaching, a moment of crisis? Is this a time for us to forget the past? Is this a time for us to forget about the plans and dreams we may have for the future? Is this a time for us to set aside everything that concerns and consumes us in the present?

Today's text raises all these questions and more. But, honestly, I'm not prepared to answer them. In the first place, it's difficult to answer those questions, because the text itself doesn't answer them. It only raises them. But that's not why. I'm not prepared to answer because these aren't questions for a preacher to answer in isolation. These are questions for a church to ask and answer together. They're not for me to answer.

I do have a hunch, though, about how answers may be found. God says — remember this? — God says, "You will seek me and find me, when you seek me with all your heart." *When you seek me with all your heart.* That's where my real problem is. I'm half-hearted at best. And most of the time, I don't mind being that way — God, forgive me.

Two weeks ago, I preached a sermon about “one thing.” I said that the one thing for us is and has to be all about Jesus. I wonder, with all these questions to ask — What is God doing today? How do we recognize it? What are we prepared to do in the face of it? And are we at or nearing a moment of crisis? — could it be that, if and when we are all about Jesus . . . could that somehow be both the beginning and the end of our search for answers?

I wonder.