



*“The Expulsive Power of a New Affection”*

Hosea 11:1-11; Colossians 3:1-4, 12-17; Luke 12:13-21

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Tenth Sunday after Pentecost

It was Christmas at Grandma and Grandpa’s house. All Gloria’s siblings, their spouses, and children gathered back home in Ohio for the holiday. Each family then lived within driving distance of the old farm, and each of us loaded our car trunks with presents for our children and all 10 of their cousins – and the aunts and uncles too. When we arrived, we unloaded our cars and piled the loot under the Christmas tree in the living room. By Christmas Eve the pile was probably three feet high.

Needless to say the children were beside themselves with anticipation. By the time we adults were stirring on Christmas morning, the children, still in their pajamas, were gathered around the Christmas tree wide eyed with excitement.

But there were traditions to follow before presents were opened. We all had to eat a hearty breakfast of bacon and eggs. Then Grandpa read the Christmas story. At long last, we gathered around the tree – and, in an orderly fashion, divided the presents into a pile for each child. The final instructions were given: the children would take turns opening presents. One at a time, Grandpa said, waiting for everyone to open a present before beginning the next round.

That lasted for maybe a round and a half. Quickly, the present opening degenerated into a frenzy of tearing paper, ripped boxes, emerging toys, and on to the next present and the next. It was loud chaos - accompanied by hoots of laughter by the watching adults.

The orgy of greed ended when the last present was open. The children quickly began to compare presents and, of course, each thought they came up on the short end. Playing with the new toys was accompanied by quiet complaints about some cousin’s pile and a general refusal to share with anyone else.

We parents did not have to teach our children to be greedy. They already knew how. Human nature assisted by TV commercials and toy stores and a sibling or two were tutor enough.

On Sunday when we took the children to church, we had to compel them to pay attention. We had to teach them the rituals and language of worship and Christian faith. I suspect all of them would rather have spent that hour in the toy store.

Goodness and godliness are not, it seems, as natural as lust, greed, selfishness, and shading the truth for our own benefit.

Oh, and I must add, by early afternoon, the good times were over. The kids retreated into a sullen boredom and a sturdy refusal to share, accompanied by a tear here and there.

Greed has some nasty consequences – whether you're a child or an adult.

Some of you are likely remembering the famous greed quote from the film *Wall Street*: "Greed is good." The film is a moralistic drama about the power and destructiveness of unfettered greed and the lust for the quick buck. It's a tale about insider trading and moral corruption in high places versus old school ethics and investor patience. One of the characters, played by Hal Holbrook, is an old school investor who says, "Good things often take time."

The protagonist – and villain – is the character Gordon Gekko, played by Michael Douglas. The famous greed quote is in a paragraph worth repeating,

The point is, ladies and gentlemen, that: Greed, for lack of a better word, is good. Greed is right; greed works. Greed clarifies, cuts through, and captures the essence of the evolutionary spirit. Greed, in all of its forms, greed for life, for money, for love, knowledge, has marked the upward surge of mankind, and greed – you mark my words – will not only save Teldar Paper, but that other malfunctioning corporation called the USA.

Well, the point of the movie is that Gekko is wrong. His insider trading is detected and, in the end, he loses. The good guys, those who refuse to chase the quick buck, who stay within legal and ethical boundaries, they win.

Arts and literature are filled with dramas that portray greed as an ugly, grotesque distortion of the basic human drive to succeed. Greed is self-interest gone mad.

Our entire culture rests on Adam Smith's insight that enlightened self-interest is the most powerful human motivation. Enlightened self-interest creates wealth, jobs, upward mobility, progress, democratic processes, and other civic virtues.

The key, of course, is the word "enlightened" self-interest. It's self-interest with moral boundaries; self-interest that stops short of doing harm to others, the larger community or to one's self.

But all the movies, novels produced, not even the steady stream of disgraced movers and shakers toward prison, nor enlightened laws guarding society from predators, seem to curb self-interest from the ruthlessness that makes some people predators – or the destructive power that seems to put moral blinders on the rest of us.

Greed in large and smaller forms is dangerous and corrupting. It tears families apart, divides communities, corrupts the political process, and, finally, deceives and destroys the self.

"Everyone has a price." Or, so they say. "Follow the money," is how the Watergate Scandal was unraveled. "Make him an offer he can't refuse," the Godfather said, assuming few people can refuse the right offer.

Excessive self-interest in all its forms stuns the conscience into inactivity. At its least, greed, the lust for some thing for which we long, causes good people to blur ethical lines, steal, deceive themselves. At its worst, greed causes wars and brings down governments. Greed and its deadly siblings, lust and gluttony, are deadly sins.

We know better. Common sense suggests strongly that we should not trust a greedy person. We loathe public greed. We condemn the conspicuously greedy. The wisdom of

the ages adds its voice. A Roman proverb says, “Money is like sea water. The more you drink, the thirstier you become.” If that weren’t enough, Scripture is clear. St. Paul agrees, “The love of money is the root of all sorts of evil,” he writes. Jesus put it even more bluntly, “What does it profit if a person gains the whole world, but loses their soul?”

In our Gospel lesson, a man came to Jesus and asked him to settle a monetary dispute with his brother. The man thought he’d been cheated in his inheritance. He wanted more, of course. Jesus responded by telling the man he was no arbiter of quarrels over inheritances. He turned to his disciples and warned them about the dangers of greed. Then he told a story to make his point.

Once there was a rich farmer. It was a time when farming was the chief business pursuit of the day. This rich farmer had a very good year. A bumper crop was too large to fit in his barns so he determined to build bigger and better barns in which to store his wealth.

Quite satisfied with himself, he said to himself, “Self! Life is good. I have quite enough. I think I’ll retire and enjoy the rest of my life and all this wealth.”

But God replied, “You fool! Tonight your soul is required of you.” And that night the man died.

“So it will be,” Jesus said, “with those who store up things for themselves and are not rich toward God.”

The point is not to curse wealth, but to point out the blinding power of wealth and greed. This man took no thought for God nor his neighbor. He was not rich toward God or God’s creation – the definition of a real human.

Excessive self-interest in all its forms turns life inside-out. It turns trust into suspicion, love into lust, ambition into cravenness, generosity into stinginess, achievement into mere accumulation. The power of greed turns soaring vision into shrunken hearts and souls. It renders us incapable of enjoying life as it is here and now.

The antidote for greed large and small is not what we might expect. Jesus gave no condemnation of wealth or healthy self-interest – after all, he taught the chief thing is to love our neighbor *as we love ourselves*. Nor is the biblical answer to destructive self-interest moralistic suggestions or moral self-help.

The human problem is not desire itself – for desire is a good thing. Rather, our problem is that we desire the wrong things. C. S. Lewis suggests we humans are far too easily pleased – by things that really don’t count for much.

Without a proper object of desire, we rush breathlessly toward everything that appeals to us – and greedily pursue it all. We suffer from disordered desire.

The Epistle Lesson offers a way out – a way to become truly human. It’s a gift from God offered those who believe - have faith in – the good news offered in and by Jesus Christ. We, the people of faith, are given a new life. The power of the resurrection of Christ forms a new creation and a new set of desires – and, mind you, a new community in which to express those desires.

Paul uses an image familiar to his readers obscured by centuries of Christian practice. He refers to their baptism as a demonstration of the new creation. Back then, baptism ritual included taking off one’s clothes and walking through a pool of water. On the other side, members of the congregation dressed the baptized person in a new white robe. It was a public reminder. In Christ and in the new community, the old life is past and the new creation has begun. It wasn’t perfect, of course, Paul had to write and remind them. We are all works in progress.

That new set of clothes is revolutionary and transforming. Listen again: “put off your old worn clothing – and greed, a form of idolatry, is specifically mentioned as garb inappropriate to the new creation.

Then put on your new outfit. Put on compassion and then look in the mirror. Fits, doesn't it? Here's kindness. Put it on. Nice fit, isn't it? Don't forget to put on humility, gentleness, and patience. Doesn't that feel good? Don't forget to put on forgiveness – after all, God has forgiven you.

Those virtues are all relational. The new creation creates new relationships. Period! It is impossible for an excessively self-interested person to rise every day and put on this outfit: compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and forgiveness. God draws a moral, ethical boundary around our desires. Namely, we are bound to each other by and in the grace of God.

And above all, he adds, put on love. Love is like a cord running through the whole outfit and binds it all together. And, mind you, love will produce peace in your hearts and in your community. And all this is because God is a God of compassion, kindness, gentleness, patience, and forgiveness – and above all, love.

And all that great God asks of us is our love – for God and for our neighbor. We cannot, by our own moral power, force greed and other warped desires from our hearts. But the love of God can.

I borrowed my title from an old English Puritan Divine's sermon title, “The Expulsive Power of a New Affection.” It's the love of God, God's love for us experienced and returned. God's love in us loving one another, that is what transforms the human spirit and makes us what we're intended to be. And by that power of sheer divine love, God is creating a new community marked by God's generosity and free grace. A new community in which, Paul adds, “there is neither Greek nor Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Sythian, bond or free” – and he adds in another place, “neither male nor female” – but Christ is all and in all.”

I've sat by the bedsides of people in their last days of life. I've not once heard one ask for someone to bring their bankbook or stock portfolio. They don't ask for their boat, their gold, or any of their stuff. People call for the people they love to be with them in the final hours. It's a request that is morally clarifying.

I've also talked to hundreds of people about their departed loved ones as we prepared for their funerals. We usually ask the family to talk about the deceased person – to remember them out loud.

They never talk about how important dad or mom were in business or government. I've never heard a loved one mention how much the deceased was worth. They always remember the moral goodness of the person. Usually someone says, “The most important thing is this, “He loved us. She loved us.”

So put on compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience. Forgive each other, and above all, put on love which binds that whole outfit together.

And ask yourself, “What will they say about me when I'm gone?”

Amen.

