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“Giving Up Greed”

Luke 12:13-21

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Someone in the crowd said to Jesus, "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me."

But he said to him, "Friend, who set me to be a judge or arbitrator over you?"

And he said to them, "Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed. For one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions."

Then he told them a parable: "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'll do this: I'll pull down my barns and build larger ones, and there I'll store all my grain and my goods. And I'll say to my soul, Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years. Relax, eat, drink, be merry.' But God said to him, 'You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?' So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God."

Luke 12:13-21

With many of Jesus' parables, preachers end up making ambiguous, defensive comments like: "It might mean what it says, but it could also mean," or "The first century Jewish world is so different that we shouldn't assume this has anything to do with us," or "While the most obvious interpretation is troubling, it's possible to read this story in a less disturbing way."

The problem with the parable of the rich fool is that there is not any room to negotiate. This story is too easily understood. This is about greed. This is about people who

eat expensive meals when they are not hungry, buy tickets to events they do not really want to attend, have more money than 95% of the world and want more. This story is about people with equities and mutual funds. I wish there was another way to read it, but this story is about you and me.

We struggle with the tension between spending money on ourselves and sharing with those who need it more. We struggle with how much we spend on entertainment, when so many are hungry. We struggle with what Jesus thinks of our desire for a renovation, a better location, or a longer vacation.

In 1987, in Wall Street, Michael Douglas' Gordon Gecko shocked everyone with this speech: "The point is, ladies and gentleman, 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 has marked the upward surge of mankind. And greed—you mark my words—will save the USA."

At the time, the speech was considered shocking. Now it sounds normal. What used to be a vice is considered a virtue. We are encouraged to want more. We are expected to want more. For the most part, we go along.

Imagine that others had access to your financial records (investment portfolios, savings, credit card bills, tax returns, receipts), but knew nothing else about you. What sorts of judgments could they make about your character, your loves, your values, your excesses, and your ideals? We let greed make us less caring.

Early Christians believed that possessions belonged to

everyone. Contemporary Christians do not think that way. What if we did think like the first Christians?

Rebecca DeYoung, a Catholic philosophy professor, writes: “The money for your expensive coffee this morning belonged to the child who came to school with no breakfast. The new winter coat hanging in your closet next to four other coats (now out of style) belongs to the homeless person you passed on your way downtown. And the money you have saved for retirement would make the difference between subsistence and starvation for the sweatshop workers who made your favorite hiking boots (worn only twice). It is the hungry one’s bread that you hoard, the naked one’s cloak that you retain, the needy one’s money that you withhold.”

I do not want to think like that. You do not want to think like that. We are so used to having too much that the thought of giving up luxuries feels like a sacrifice. Luxury is an ever-escalating category of things that are totally unnecessary (James Twitchell).

But greed does not work. Rather than providing freedom from anxiety, wealth increases our stress. According to a Princeton study, money contributes to happiness when it helps meet basic needs, but the research says that above a certain level more money does not yield much more happiness. Happiness increased with salary until participants earned \$75,000 a year. Beyond this point, the correlation between salary and happiness decreased.

Most do not believe the data. People making \$30,000 thought increasing their salary to \$50,000 would make them happy. Those earning \$100,000 estimated a salary

of \$250,000 would make them happy. People always think they need more money to be happy. But multimillionaires are not significantly happier than those working with regular amounts of money. Lottery winners are famously unhappy (thehappinessindex.com). The really rich are not really happy, really fulfilled, or really contented. Greedy people keep wanting more, because greed never says, "That's enough."

Frederick Buechner writes: "The trouble with being rich is that since you can solve with your money virtually all of the practical problems that bedevil ordinary people, you are left in your leisure with nothing but the great human problems to contend with: how to be happy, how to love and be loved, how to find meaning and purpose in your life. In desperation the rich are continually tempted to believe that they can solve these problems too with their money, which is presumably what led Jesus to remark one day that for a rich man to get to heaven is about as easy as for a Mercedes to get through a revolving door."

We do not care for a story like the one Jesus tells about the rich fool, because we suspect it is true, and we are the rich fool. We are the young man in a purple linen robe who pushes through the crowd toward Jesus. Everyone is watching him.

Jesus asks, "May I help you?"

The young man has an imposing voice: "Rabbi, make my brother divide the inheritance with me. I want my share."

"You're lucky enough to have an inheritance. I don't have a place to sleep tonight."

The young man is not amused: "I'm not an heir yet. My

brother refuses to comply. All the rabbis since Moses have insisted that if one of the sons wants it, the inheritance has to be divided. All I want is what's rightfully mine."

Now Jesus is not amused: "Friend, who made me a judge between you and your brother?"

"Rabbi, I just want what's coming to me."

His voice is as logical as a spread sheet: "I'm not asking for what isn't mine. I'm not asking you to be a judge. I just want you to tell my brother to follow the law."

Everyone is impressed with how reasonable he is being—everyone except one.

Jesus tells a story: Once there was a rich farmer. He was well into middle age—not like you. He was a little soft around the edges—not like you.

One evening, the foreman of his farm knocks at the door: "The wheat's sprouted in a strange way, tripling what we expected."

The farmer says, "I have to see this."

A servant brings him a torch. He and the foreman go into the fields. The torch pushes back the darkness enough for the farmer to see that somehow the seed has multiplied.

The foreman says, "The earth is generous. You're the heir of a miracle."

But the farmer does not hear him. Thinking to himself, having only himself to think to, he thinks, "I need bigger barns to hold my wheat."

The farmer commands, "We have to build more barns to hold what's mine."

He hires carpenters to build special locks for the barns. When they see the incredible abundance of wheat, they tell

the farmer, "You are blessed."

The farmer asks, "Will the locks be strong enough?"

On the final day of the harvest there is no celebration. As soon as the workers finish, the farmer dismisses them. He wants to secure the locks himself.

When the last wooden bar slides into place, the farmer thinks, "I will never be hungry."

Jesus stares directly at the young man who thinks himself nothing like the farmer: "He never was hungry. He died that night. What will happen to all that was rightfully his? Whose inheritance will it be now?" (This retelling of the story is dependent on the work of John Shea.)

Not long afterwards, one of the disciples may have taken Jesus aside to say: "Jesus, you know I'm a big fan of your stories. I think they're great. But I hope you don't mind if I offer a little constructive criticism on the one about the rich farmer who dies. You may not realize how people hear that. When you tell that story it sounds like you're trying to make rich people feel guilty. People think you're insinuating that they're greedy. I know money is a big issue for you, but you need to realize that when you make people feel guilty, they also get angry."

This story is harsh. The rich man is a successful businessperson who worked hard and has been rewarded. He sets aside savings so that he can enjoy his retirement. What is wrong with that? Yet Jesus insists on calling this person a fool.

Maybe Jesus thinks he is a fool because only fools pretend not to see the people who need what they have. Look at the pronouns in the rich fool's speech: I, I, my, I, I, my, I, my, my, I, my, myself. In the 46 Greek words in this

parable the farmer refers to himself twelve times. He is totally self-absorbed. This fool is stuck in the first-person singular. No thought of neighbor or of God. When he realizes that he has more than enough, the one thing that never enters his mind is to give some away.

Jesus ends his gruesome story with the death of the farmer. Maybe he thinks that reminding us that we are going to die will push us to get on with things that matter. A grim Spanish proverb has it, No hay bolsas en una mortaja: "There are no pockets in a shroud."

Death mocks greed's lie that money offers real security. Death marks the final failure of money to bring us joy.

Luke does not tell us how the people who heard Jesus' parable responded. It is such a difficult story that we assume that most ignored it. That is probably true.

But it is possible that in the crowd there is a person who has a barn filled with grain who has been considering building a new barn. His accountant tells him that he should look for places to put his wealth and diversify his portfolio.

The rich man is used to thinking only of himself, but when Jesus tells this parable, he decides he does not want Jesus' story of the rich fool to be his story. He looks at his bank statement and knows that he has money he can give away and never miss, but he wants to give enough to miss it. He wants to stop buying so many luxuries for himself and start living generously for others, and so he does. The accountant assumes his rich employer is now less rich, but the rich person knows his accountant is wrong. He becomes richer than before.

We can be richer than before. We can move from the vice of greed to the virtue of generosity, from the emptiness of a covetous heart to the joy of an open heart. Trade the deadly sin of greed for the way that leads to life. Confront the big part of us that says “more” with the smaller, better part that says “enough.”

According to the Princeton study, spending money on other people does lead to increased happiness. The really generous are really happy, really fulfilled, and really contented.

So, develop the habit of giving things away. Begin by being generous in the first thing we can think of. Give to this congregation’s ministry.

Will Willimon writes that the offering is “one of the most radical, countercultural, defiant acts the church demands of us.”

We give to the church to put our money where our hearts are, remember that we are not alone in fighting greed, and stand up to a culture that tells us not to share. Buy things for their usefulness rather than their status. When we are considering an apartment or a house, we should think about livability rather than how much it will impress others. Do not buy anything that is addicting for us. Some need to push our screens farther away. The media tells us we need more, even when we have more than we need.

Learn to enjoy things without owning them. Share things like public parks and libraries. Develop a deeper appreciation for the free gifts that surround us. Walk thoughtfully. Pay attention to daily pleasures.

Be generous like Jesus. Jesus was a joyful person who knew he had enough. He accepted an occasional extravagance. Jesus enjoyed good things, but his life was not organized around the accumulation of money. He showed us how generosity moves us from our little selves to a larger world.

We travel lighter and breathe easier. True “spirituality is about letting go” (Richard Rohr). We can let go of greed. We can open our hearts to joy.

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