

The Temptation of Greed  
Luke 12:13-21  
First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)  
August 4, 2019  
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We roll our eyes at pictures like this one – a hearse pulling a U-Haul. We know, after all, that you can't take it with you.

And we roll our eyes at pictures like this one – Scrooge McDuck swimming through piles of money, totally attached to the currency of his day.

And yet the reality is that greed is all around us and the messages of satisfying our own desires, of accumulating money and stuff and power...those messages are all around us. In fact, sometimes in such subtle ways that we don't even notice.

While it might be easy for us to see the absurdity in towing our stuff to the cemetery or swimming laps in our wealth, we are less likely to see the absurdity in another set of storage units being built down the street or another dollar store opening so that we can buy more of what we already don't use just because it only costs a dollar.

We are so inundated with messages of accumulation and self that we have stopped noticing things like how common the word "deserve" is in advertising, drawing us in to spend more money, to buy another product, to hold our own wealth closer to us, because we have earned it or because we are told that we are so good or special that *should* have it.

Today as we continue to talk about common temptations, we turn to the temptation of greed. And, it's okay to be honest and say that this is not our favorite one to talk about. Because again, being honest, we know that we all give into this temptation at least from time to time. We know that it is difficult to live in this world, in our culture, and not be familiar with greed.

Today's story begins with someone approaching Jesus because he wants Jesus to act as judge and get him a larger inheritance. But instead of doing that, instead of solving the problem for this man, instead of taking his side or even disappointing him and taking his brother's side, Jesus told a parable and left him to find his answer.

The parable, as we heard already this morning, read this way, "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.' 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."'<sup>1</sup>

Now in my experience our first response to this parable often come in two forms: that of naming that we aren't as rich as the man in the parable and therefore why it doesn't apply to us, or that of talking about the last time we took our old clothes to Goodwill or some nearly expired food to the food pantry as proof that we are generous.

But, if we are willing, there is a much larger conversation to engage.

And perhaps the first thing to acknowledge is that in this world we who live in the United States and certainly the "we" present here in this sanctuary this morning are among the "haves" of humanity.

We must also acknowledge the reality that the Biblical instructions about our relationship with money, wealth, and the accumulation of stuff, are instructions that vary from situation to

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<sup>1</sup> Luke 12:16b-21, NRSV.

situation but in which the bottom line is about the value of relationships, of community, and of God over the value of stuff. The bottom line isn't that money is evil, but it is that we must be willing to be honest and thoughtful about our relationships with material things because too easily those relationships disrupt the will and intention of God.

As David Lose wrote about today's text, "It's not about the money. Not in this parable or in life....Jesus doesn't warn against money, wealth, or material abundance. He warns against greed, about the insatiable feeling of never having enough. And the parable he tells illustrates this. The farmer's problem isn't that he's had a great harvest, or that he's rich, or that he wants to plan for the future. The farmer's problem is that his good fortune has curved his vision so that everything he sees starts and ends with himself."<sup>2</sup>

Greed isn't just about money or a certain amount of it. We can't say that a person whose income is higher than a certain number is greedy while those with less are not. Rather greed is about that position from which we live. It is about relationship. One needs not have so much that a bigger barn is necessary in order to be greedy. While we can see, through the modern phenomena of gated communities, security systems and multiple door locks, that having more stuff in our culture often inclines us to a position of greater protectiveness and greater suspicion of the stranger or the other, but it does not mean that those of us with less don't also struggle with those same temptations. And it does not mean that those with more can't be in right relationship with God and others.

Because it is relationship that is at the foundation of this parable. This is about being in deep enough relationship with God that we are changed by that relationship. It is about valuing people more than things. It is about understanding that our first loyalty, our first allegiance, our

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<sup>2</sup> David Lose, <http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=2668>

first commitment is to God and to neighbor and *then* it is about living in such ways that the wealth we have and the relationships we build reflect that value, rather than teaching something very different.

See, the rich man in this parable isn't a fool simply because he is rich. Rather it is the fact that he lives as if he is an island, that is what makes him foolish.

Did you notice that he doesn't call on God or humans in any of his decision making? He doesn't appear to even think of God or humans as he considers what to do with his abundance. Rather, his conversations are simply held with himself. His conclusions are simply about himself.

And the difficult reality is that greed and accumulation are such a part of our culture that we don't even know to identify them as temptations or connect them with sin.

But Jesus warns us against them. Why? Because they get in the way of relationships, of joy, of priorities. Our love of stuff, our greed, isolates us from God and neighbor and certainly isolates us from being motivated by our love for God and neighbor. In fact, not only do we lose that motivation, but when we give in to the temptation of greed, we experience increased fear and anxiety and decreased security.

And, friends, we cannot afford this. In a world where people at festivals, doing their weekly shopping or out for an evening with friends aren't safe from gunfire...in a world where the darker the pigment of your skin, the less safe you are...in a world where racist rants are common and our differences are used to divide us...we cannot risk choosing stuff over people or only thinking of ourselves.

The man in the parable turned so far in on himself that he had only himself. May we be willing to be honest enough about our temptations, about our struggles, about the ways that our

greed for money and stuff and power interfere in our relationships with God and others; may we be honest enough about all of this that we can keep our eyes and our hearts open to God and to our neighbors.

Again today I invite us to pray a prayer of confession. When you hear me pray, “Too often we give in to greed”, I invite you to respond, “Forgive us, O God.” Let us pray.

Leader: God, you are so generous with us. You give us love in abundance, neighbors with whom to share the journey, a world filled with beauty and hope. And yet too often we use people and things for our own selfish desires. Too often we give in to greed.

People: Forgive us, O God.

Leader: God, it is difficult to confess, but we acknowledge that when you call us to look outward, we too often turn inward, setting aside the needs of our neighbors in favor of our own desires. We acknowledge that when you call us to reach out to you, too often we instead look for our security in ownership and accumulation. Too often we give in to greed.

People: Forgive us, God.

Leader: And so, today, as we confess, we ask that you help us to lift our eyes toward you, to open our hearts toward humanity and this world, that we might let go of all that gets in the way of deeper relationships and instead choose love. Amen.