

Pentecost 11C (7/31/2016)
Ecclesiastes 1:2, 12-14
Psalm 49:1-12
Colossians 3:1-11
Luke 12:13-21

Greed is a sickness to which none of us is immune. It's a predisposition toward accumulation, a creeping sense of entitlement, a stubborn ingratitude. There's a reason Jesus warns against material wealth. Greed is so embedded in our culture that we have enshrined it as a virtue, but Jesus calls us out of our preoccupation with "me" and into the possibility of "we." When we grasp the extent to which God is rich toward us, we love more generously and joyfully.

Let me tell you the story of a faithful man who built a business. He started with very little, and struggled for a long time to turn a profit. Nevertheless, throughout the early years, he never failed to tithe on his income, offering ten percent of what little he brought in as a gesture of gratitude to God. Eventually, as a result of his hard work and good fortune, the man's business grew by leaps and bounds. Flooded with prosperity, he began to worry about his tithe. Ten percent of his income suddenly seemed like too great a sacrifice. So, the man went to his pastor to discuss his dilemma and ask for prayer. She listened attentively, thought for a moment, and finally responded: "Well, I suppose we can pray for one of two things: either for the strength of faith to continue to tithe on your abundance, or for God to shrink your business back down to the size it was last year."

There is one significant difference between the faithful businessman in this story and the rich fool in our Gospel from Luke today. The rich fool never

once factors God into the equation; he never gives a thought to the source of his wealth or the possibility that he might put it to use for the sake of the common good. All he worries about is the size of his barns. In this way, **the rich fool is a caricature of greed, a tragic case of self-centered solitude.** “You fool!” God chides, “This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will be they be?”

But greed is much more insidious than the illustration in our Gospel. Unlike the rich fool, the faithful businessman in my parable is genuinely troubled by the quandary of having too much. He does give thought to the responsibility that accompanies material wealth. But, his reluctance to match the size of his offering to the size of his blessing betrays his own tendency toward greed. In spite of his sincerity, greed is a sickness to which he is no more immune than the rich fool, or any of us, for that matter. **Greed is a predisposition toward accumulation, a creeping sense of entitlement, a stubborn ingratitude.** *What’s mine is mine, greed insists, and I’ll part with as little of it as possible, even if I have more than I need.*

It’s no coincidence that the words “I,” “me,” and “my” pervade the parable of the rich fool.¹ But before we distance ourselves from the character at the center of the story, maybe we ought to take a step back and ask how his self-interested behavior might actually be interpreted in our context. After all,

¹ Audrey West, in *Feasting on the Word*, Year C, Vol. 3, 312.

he is self-made, and has never taken a handout from anyone. He runs a successful, legal business venture. And, he is prudent enough not to squander his surplus, but rather save it for future trade, thereby guaranteeing his profitability in a lean year. So, who are we to disparage the rich man? Who are we to begrudge him his success? When he congratulates himself for his prosperity, we ought to applaud instead.

Greed is so embedded in our culture that we have enshrined it as a virtue. We equate self-interest with responsibility, good judgment, decency. If you don't look out for number one, who will? And, through this lens, giving is virtually heroic, so we expect to be praised appropriately for it.

But, **Jesus calls us out of our preoccupation with "me" and into the possibility of "we."** There's a reason he warns against material wealth. When we are fixated on what is ours, we neglect to acknowledge the source of our blessing as well as its ultimate purpose. Greed, in other words, is tunnel-vision, focusing our attention solely on our interests to the exclusion of God and the neighbors to whom God calls us.

Dear church, **all we have comes by grace alone.** "We are beggars," Martin Luther scribbled on a scrap of paper beside his death bed. This is as true for material blessings as it is for spiritual ones. Jesus' parable urges his followers to be "rich toward God," but this is only possible because **God is exceedingly rich toward us.** "Our selves, our time," and, yes, "our

possessions” are “signs of [God’s] gracious love,”² expressions of God’s desire that we enjoy the profound goodness of being. Indeed, **every breath we take is a gift.** So, in the end, the real tragedy of the rich fool’s greed is that it blinds him to the One who has laid his entire life before him, the same One who also marks the end of it.

Our possessions are gifts of God, but our lives are God’s possession.

When we recognize the sheer grace of being alive and having what we need, we are suddenly free to loosen our grip on all that God has given us. And, when we loosen our grip, we are free to treat our possessions the way they were always meant to be treated: as means of blessing for a world in need. So, **when we have an abundance, let’s “build a longer table, not a higher fence.” Or, to suit our Gospel for today, let’s build a longer table, not a bigger barn.**

² *Lutheran Book of Worship*, 67.