

Luke 12:13-21

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 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."

I'm going to give you the take away from the sermon this morning...Greed is good!

Now that I have your attention, what do you think when the subject of greed comes up? Is it good...bad...does it matter at all?

In the movie Wall Street, Michael Douglas says that memorable line. At a shareholders meeting he spouts the wisdom of the world, greed is good, and in many ways that has come to define corporate American. "Greed is good." Now those of us who have seen that movie, we know that what Michael Douglas is saying is definitely not a sermon on our Gospel passage from this morning. But it got me wondering. I mean, I try to, or at least would like to, as much as I can, present an uplifting message each Sunday. After all, there really is a lot to be thankful for, right? This is especially true when you look at it from the perspective of God and heaven. And so I was wondering. Is greed always bad? Are there situations where greed can actually be good?

But then we read again the passage from this morning. Jesus is warning the crowd. He is warning the crowd that they should take care and be on their guard against all kinds of greed. They should steer clear of greed. He goes on to teach that life is more than just the abundance of possessions.

"All kinds of greed," he said. "Be on guard," he said. "It is not about abundance of possessions," he tells us. Life is not about the abundance of possessions. If you think it is, Jesus would say, you just plain have it wrong.

And then to help them understand, in order to drive his point home, he paints a picture. You know how he does, he tells a story that they can relate to. He tells a parable about at least one example of greed that we might use to understand all greed.

In the story there's this guy who already has a lot. We don't know how he came to be so wealthy. It really doesn't matter for the point of the story. One year his fields produce big time. So much so that there is nowhere to put it all. Something has to be done and the only solution he can come up with is to build bigger barns in order to store all HIS grain. And so he does. Bigger, better barns. If it was today, they probably would be air conditioned with Wi-Fi and cable TV. He stores his abundance not because of a particular great need on his part. He does it so that he can go forth and embrace life. You know, "Eat, drink, and be merry." Live life large!

But what Jesus is trying to tell him is that he is focused on the wrong things. "Man, you're a fool, he tells him. You are focused on the physical and the temporal, instead of the spiritual and the eternal! You are focused on the stomach and what goes into it, rather than the heart and what comes out of it. You are focused on possessions when you should be focused on gifts. You are focused on yourself when you need to be focused on God."

And that is what Jesus calls greed. He uses the story as an example, as a model, in order to portray to them, and us, by extension all greed. But what is it in the story that makes the actions of the wealthy land owner greed? Is it the abundance of grain? Is it the new large barns on the estate? Is it the tremendous wealth that he already had before the growing season even began? Is it the possessions that define greed? Or is it him? Is it about the person? Is it his self-focus in the midst of the abundance that creates the condition of greed?

You know there are a lot of types of greed. There is greed for possessions, like we heard. But there is also the greed for power. There is greed for appearance and reputation and image. There is the greed for... well, you could probably come up with a whole list with me, I'm sure.

The Oxford Dictionary defines greed as "A strong desire to continually get more of something." They use it in a sentence to give it context... "He was motivated by pure greed." I suppose that is a good definition. I mean, who am I to dispute what the Oxford Dictionary says. But it seems to me that it needs more. Maybe we need more in order to clarify whether we are talking about something bad or something good. Or is greed always bad?

How about another story.

Neville Peter was born on November 17, 1972 on the island of St. Thomas. It wasn't too long before his parents noticed that something wasn't quite right. He wasn't responding well to visual stimulation. He never made eye contact. The doctors diagnosed his problem as Glaucoma. He was completely blind by the time he was 12.

As a child he developed a love for music and sang in his church choir and learned to play the piano. He was amazing.

As a young adult he went off to University of Miami and graduated with a degree in Music.

After college he was approached by a person who wanted to invest in his career. He was going to make Neville the next Stevie Wonder...they even look similar. He played at expensive clubs in South Beach with people like Gladys Knight. He was becoming a rich man with fields that would undoubtedly produce abundantly.

One night, however, his desire for getting more shifted. He was playing at a club owned by Michael Caine, the actor, and during the set his focus changed. The way he put it was that at that moment on stage he became passionate for something different. He became passionate for God.

Since that night in 1998, at the age of 26, he has written over 100 successful gospel songs that praise God. They appear on albums by Gladys Knight, and Natalie Cole, and the Winans, and many others. He is now cutting his own albums.

He has done well, but he appears to live fairly simply and takes joy in things like cleaning his bathroom mirror in which he will never see himself and vacuuming his apartment on Fridays so that whoever might visit over the weekend would feel welcomed and comfortable. Neville Peter has an abundance of joy that our rich man in our Gospel today would never be able to understand. Neville Peter has an abundance of life that our rich man in the Gospel could only dream of.

When I finished watching the 15 minute bio on Neville, I left with the thought that there is a greedy man. I mean, he fits the Oxford definition. He has the strong desire to continually get more of something. He has a passionate desire to continually connect more and more, deeper and deeper, further and further, to God. He is motivated by pure greed in order to draw closer and closer to God and then help others find what he has received.

So maybe some greed can be good.

I also looked up in the Oxford Dictionary the definition of hunger. The first definition pertained to food. The second definition, however, said this: "A strong wish or desire for something." Sound familiar?

On that stage in Miami Neville became hungry in a new way, so passionately, I might add, that it might very well be described as greed for God. You have heard it said that God is a jealous God. Well, isn't it also true that we should be hungry for God, maybe even greedy?

That is how we should be coming to church...passionately hungry for something more, passionately hungry for God.

That is how we should be in the world...passionately hungry for God to use us to bring joy and meaning and truth to our distracted world, passionately hungry for God to fill our schools and guide our businesses and lead our politics.

That is how we should be in our homes...passionately hungry for the Spirit to reside in our homes with us, passionately desirous for our children and grandchildren to know the God that we know, passionately hungry that anyone and everyone who enters our home should be blessed with an authentic encounter with God.

Passionately hungry for God and all that God brings to our lives.

Our time on this physical earth is so short. Why in the world does the world spend so much of it building barns to our own glory?

Amen.