

Sermon Series: Disordered Love

Greed

Psalms 49, Luke 12:13 – 21

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Whether there are snow storms or hurricanes, storms and the damage and disruption they cause often have a way of helping us see things more clearly. So this snowy morning, as we look at the disordered love that comes from greed and its antidotal practice of generosity, it seems appropriate to start with a storm story, a modern day parable of sorts, that paints for us two competing visions of life that we find in our world today.

Back in 2005, Hurricane Rita came through east Texas.¹ Most of Nacogdoches was without electricity due to downed trees and debris, but one of the first places to have power restored was Austin Heights Baptist Church. It naturally became a central clearinghouse for work crews going out sawing limbs and clearing debris. Thirty to thirty five folks - evacuees from Houston and church members - moved into the church building. Another twenty five or so cleaned out their now powerless and thawing refrigerators and freezers and brought the food to the church for everyone to share common meals. At the end of the day, they'd gather at the church for extraordinary shared meals of trout, chicken cordon-bleu, and steaks. After dinner, you'd see people playing games and sharing in long conversations. You'd peek in a Sunday school room and see fathers reading stories with four or five little boys; in another room, a bunch of little girls were getting ready for bed. It was a good time of sharing life in Christ.

Later, the Pastor went down the street to put gas in his car. He waited behind a man and his wife in their one-ton dually pickup truck. Guns hung prominently in the truck as they got out. She glared at everyone, keeping the truck door open with the guns in easy reach, while he proceeded to fill up his two twenty-two-gallon tanks in the pickup and then fill up his many gas cans and two fifty-five-gallon drums in the back-end. The pastor watched, not getting too close. He knew that he was looking at American society in microcosm, witnessing what the Church is up against. Clearly, this couple believed they were on their own; they did not need anyone or want anyone to interfere with their individual lives, and they were going to make sure they got what they wanted or needed, by any means, including the use of violence. Meanwhile, down the street was a church full of people who believed that the good life was found not in securing what "me and mine" need through whatever means necessary but in sharing a common life in Jesus Christ.

The storm heightened the stark differences that are usually muted and covered over by our affluence, busy routines, and focus on our own individual and family responsibilities. As much as we love to come together, most of our congregations do not live such a shared life as Austin Heights experienced that week; at the same time, the contrasting life of armed, independent

autonomy usually is not so blatantly displayed as by that couple at the gas station. But, this morning, as we consider the problem of greed and the practice of generosity, this story provides a backdrop. All of us are, I imagine, living somewhere in between these two extremes displayed in the aftermath of that storm, but they give us an imagination of what we often long for in terms of community, and also the sort of rugged individualism that we can easily fall into when the going gets tough.

Last week we began our Lenten sermon series on Disordered Love, looking at how sins such as greed reflect a disordering of our affections - how we love things that are not God in the place of God. Lent is a time when we take stock of where we are spiritually, and seek God's grace to help get us better on track in areas we find we've gone astray. As we continue our series this morning and look specifically at greed, we must start by acknowledging that all of us have at least at times, fallen to the temptation of greed. Whether it was in a moment of not wanting to share something we had, or on-going choices to amass more and more, this disordering of love is endemic in our culture and society - putting our own acquiring of things beyond our true need above practices of generosity and sharing. We are bombarded, from an early age, with the idea that we should desire more than "enough", more than what we truly need. And society quickly teaches us that wealth is only defined as a comparison.

A study several years ago showed that up until income reaches \$1 million a year, less than 50% of people making that amount would consider themselves rich. And after the million dollar mark, still only slightly more than 50 percent of people self-identify as wealthy. It seems that we cannot be trusted in judging whether we ourselves are rich or not. Compared to how humans have lived up until the last hundred and how the majority of the world still lives today, we are rich. Even those who are poor by American standards look wealthy compared to the reality of life for most of the world's population. We have almost universal clean running water and electricity. Food is readily available, even if it is not always the kind of food we all would want or in the quantities that we want. We might not be able to afford the hospital bills but they can't turn us away.

So, given that we are talking about greed and riches here in the most wealthy, powerful nation in the history of the world, this topic is one we all need to address, uncomfortable as it is. I don't say that to cause us all a guilt trip or to make us feel ashamed, but to remind us of the Word of God, to which our greed so often blinds us. Here in America, greed is perhaps our greatest and least resisted sin. These warnings against greed are to all of us, including me, and my prayer is that the discomfort we all might feel in talking about greed and wealth will lead to us to take our relationship with money to God, and in God's presence we can come to admit that we suspect we have an unhealthy relationship with money. In God's presence we can come to recognize our own sins and can come to confess and repent of them. That is what this season of Lent is truly

about—bringing to God the areas of our lives we suspect are out of order, and in God’s presence reordering our hearts and lives to be more fully aligned with God’s heart and the way of life we learn from Jesus.

In this morning’s passage, Jesus tells a story that, if we will let it, speaks to our tendency to trust in riches instead of trusting in God. Hear these words from Luke 12:

Let us pray: Holy Spirit, come and fill our hearts, our minds, and our spirits. Assure us of your presence that both accepts us more than we could ever accept ourselves and expects of us more than we would ever expect of ourselves. In you, may we find freedom. May we once again remember whose we are and from where every blessing comes. May we trust you enough to let you into every area of our lives, even areas we think are under control. Empower us to wonder about even the things we do not normally question, to give you greater room to make us your body. And in our wondering, our openness to be changed by you, convict us of the ways in which our hearts have disordered our love, especially when it comes to greed, wealth, and material things, and give us strength to know and follow the way of generosity and loving God with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

A while back, there was a story on Christian radio about a pastor from Haiti who came for a period of time to the US to visit and to make connections. He stayed with a family, and, although he felt warmly welcomed, and was generously provided for, after a few weeks, he decided to cut his trip short. You see, he found that being in this context of abundance and wealth, his faith was being challenged because he did not daily have to pray for and rely on God’s provision. He understood that his heart and soul were endangered by these temptations.

Were the guaranteed meals, the security of shelter and protection not good things? We find it strange that someone would prefer not knowing exactly how they would get their daily bread. Pastor Eugene Peterson says, “The devil doesn’t waste his time tempting us to do something that we know is evil. He hides the evil in something good and then tempts us with the good.”ⁱⁱ And for most of us, coming from our place of relative wealth, when we read this story of someone having a bumper crop harvest one year, and storing it for the future, perhaps even for retirement, it seems like a relatively good and harmless thing. We might think, “What’s wrong with using what God’s blessed us with to provide for ourselves, to save for a rainy day, to relax and enjoy life a little?” God wants us to be happy right?

But Jesus does not seem to think the same as we do. Jesus has God say to this man, “You fool”. We might wonder which part was most problematic—but parables don’t give us all the details. Was it that he tore down his existing barn to build a bigger one? Was it that he thought he was

set and could kick back to eat, drink and be merry? Or was it that there were hungry neighbors next door, or even hungry field hands who were starving while he stored up an excess? In what way was he not rich towards God?

The truth is that our vision is skewed because we live in a place that has from its earliest days been built on a foundation of greed, and that greed has caused harm to us, and especially to those on whose backs the wealth has come. Think about it—from the earliest days that Westerners set foot on American soil, it came at the expense of the Native Americans who were killed and stolen from. And with the enslaving of African and indigenous peoples, and the stealing of natural resources, our country's wealth was built on exploitation. This is something we do not often take time to lament. And we have not changed our ways. The systems of greed and exploitation continue today, whether we look at the slave-like labor in factories around the world that make the products we buy, or the mined and extracted resources, mostly from Third World countries that go into making our cell phones and other everyday items, or the chocolate harvested by kidnapped children to which we turn a blind eye. We would never say money is more important than those people's lives, but we would almost always choose the cheaper thing, regardless of how it got so cheap. This is greed. And greed twists its way into our hearts and lives sometimes beyond our knowledge and control. This is something we do not often confess. As Eugene Peterson says, it sometimes looks like virtue or thriftiness, something good.

As hard and uncomfortable as these realities are, this does not mean that we just throw our hands up and say, "Well what's the point in trying". Following Jesus is hard. The way is narrow. Few find it. But we don't say "Following Jesus is too complicated. I'll never get it right" And walk away. We are here today because Jesus has captivated us, made us children of God. And as children of God when we are weak, when we are over our heads, overwhelmed by what faithfulness requires, THEN God is strong. And we can begin to take humble steps towards what is right—loving our neighbors as ourselves and becoming informed about how things are made, limiting our consumption, and thinking carefully about how we use the money and the things that we have, so that people can be treated as we would treat ourselves.

John Wesley, the founder of the movement known as Methodism, believed strongly that all that we have is a gift from God, and that God entrusts us with it to be faithfully stewarded. He says: "Do you not know that God entrusted you with that money (all above what buys necessities for your families) to feed the hungry, to clothe the naked, to help the stranger, the widow, the fatherless; and, indeed, as far as it will go, to relieve the wants of all mankind? How can you, how dare you, defraud the Lord, by applying it to any other purpose?"

Wesley defined the greedy hoarding of wealth as keeping for ourselves **any** material things above basic provision of food, clothing, and shelter for ourselves and our family.

In the parable from Luke and other passages of Scripture, we find that Jesus is very clear—the problem of riches, of material wealth—is not that a big harvest (or a big paycheck) is inherently bad. No the problem is that we are so easily tempted to consider that we have earned it for ourselves, can do with it what we please without sharing generously, and no longer have to rely on God.

Considering the number of times that Jesus tells us that loving God and loving neighbor are two sides of the same coin, we understand that being rich toward God involves being rich towards our neighbors, especially those in need.

Wesley's views seem extreme to us today, but they are in keeping with Christian tradition. Interestingly, he did not always think this way. During his time at Oxford, there was a moment that perhaps forever changed his views on the uses of money.ⁱⁱⁱ He had just bought some pictures to decorate his room when one of the chambermaids came to his door. Despite the cold that day, she had nothing to wear but a thin linen gown. Reaching into his pocket to give her some money to buy a coat, he found he had too little left. Immediately the thought struck him that the Lord was not pleased with the way he had spent his money. He asked himself, **Will thy Master say, "Well done, good and faithful steward"? Thou hast adorned thy walls with the money which might have screened this poor creature from the cold! O justice! O mercy! Are not these pictures the blood of this poor maid?**

After this, Wesley began limiting his expenses so that he would have more money to give to those in need. The first year, his income was 30 pounds and his living expenses 28 pounds, so he had 2 pounds to give away. The next year his income doubled, and maintaining expenses, was able to give away 32 pounds. By the fourth year, he received 120 pounds, and still gave away all but the 28 pounds he needed to live on.

Wesley felt that the Christian should not merely tithe but give away **all extra income** once the family and creditors were taken care of. **He believed that with increasing income, what should rise is not the Christian's standard of living but the standard of giving.**

You perhaps remember his three rules: 1) earn all you can 2) save all you can 3) give all you can. The earning was to be whatever we could earn without causing harm to our mind, body or spirit and the minds, bodies, and spirits of others who might be affected by our pursuits. Saving meant not spending anything above what was truly needed. And giving meant generously contributing to meet the needs of others.^{iv}

He said: There is no end to the good [money] can do: "In the hands of [God's] children, it is food for the hungry, drink for the thirsty, raiment for the naked. It gives to the traveler and the stranger where to lay his head. By it we may supply the place of a husband to the widow, and of a father to the fatherless. We may be a defense for the oppressed, a means of health to the sick, of ease to them that are in pain. It may be as eyes to the blind, as feet to the lame: yea, a lifter up from the gates of death!"^v

But is this how we truly see things?

This week a friend wrote about the housing crisis that is being faced in his neighborhood and city, where gentrification is pushing up prices and low- and middle-income families are being displaced from their communities. He writes: "In my city, as in most American cities, we are talking now about the growing shortage of affordable housing. ... We badly need a new supply of affordable housing, we are told. The demand is overwhelming and we cannot keep up." The data back this up.

But this also misstates the problem in an important way. We do not have a shortage of housing in our cities. It is easy to find houses the size of small hotels, occupied by a minimal number of residents ...

The problem facing our cities is not a lack of affordable dwellings so much as it is a shortage of imagination. We do not lack rooms, or the ability to build them. For people who build 1,000-foot towers and mega-malls, constructing decent housing is not a problem. At the foundation of our inability to house our most vulnerable neighbors is a narrative that justifies some people getting housing built purely for efficiency, while others luxuriate in finery that fills more rooms than they could ever need. This narrative places an emphasis on social status over love of neighbor.^{vi}

Today, the bigger barns we build aren't necessarily for holding grain. We build bigger homes, bigger garages, and bigger storage units to hold all our stuff, bigger bank accounts, businesses, investment portfolios, and retirement savings. We have second homes sitting empty, while families of 8-10 people live in a 2 bedroom trailer just down the road from here. We rent space

to store extra household items while there are neighbors nearby who lack basic necessities. We spend money to satisfy desires that will only continue to grow the more we feed them, while others across town scramble to barely make ends meet. And all of our consumption leaves us and our neighbors feeling empty and further depletes the earth's resources.

This Lent, as we seek to reorder our lives, we ask ourselves: Are we closer to our income than to God? Are we more focused on our income than God's kingdom come? Do we log more hours for money than Mercy? Have we tricked ourselves into believing we can work for God and money? If we shouldn't build bigger barns, what should we do instead? How can we work for God and, as Jesus says in the parable, be rich towards God?

How can we check our own greed, our own temptation to build bigger houses, bigger storage sheds, and have bigger cars and bank accounts? As we seek to use what we have faithfully, and not just build bigger barns, maybe John Wesley's questions will help us:

1. In spending this money, am I acting like I owned it, or am I acting like the Lord's trustee?
2. What Scripture requires me to spend this money in this way?
3. Can I offer up this purchase as a sacrifice to the Lord?
4. Will God reward me for this purchase at the resurrection of the just?

When we have that feeling of discomfort in our stomachs because we aren't sure what this all means for us...or we worry that we aren't ordering our hearts and lives in the way Jesus would want, let's not react by justifying our actions or reasoning our way out of things. Our prayer is not, "Lord, I'm in good shape, right?" but instead, without even looking up to heaven, beating on our chests, we cry "Lord, have mercy on me a sinner". It is Lent, a time to take a sobering look in the mirror. Let us take our discomfort to God in prayer. Let us ask God to show us sinners the way, confessing that we can't stop wanting new and more things and lamenting that money excites us more than God. May we beat on our chests and beg God for the strength and courage to live generously and so "be rich towards God" and neighbor.

Adam Hamilton puts it this way "Lord, help me to be grateful for what I have, to remember that I don't need most of what I want, and that joy is found in simplicity and generosity." ^{vii}

As we abide in Christ this Lent, as we come to the Lord's Table to be fed, may God turn our desire for more into contentment and gratitude and our greed into generosity, as we discover that we have been given more than enough. Amen.

ⁱ I heard Rev. Childress share this story at the Summoned Toward Wholeness Conference in 2013, but have adapted it from his written account found in "Ties that Bind: Sharing a Common Rule of Life", p. 33-34. <http://www.baylor.edu/content/services/document.php/116014.pdf>

ⁱⁱ Eugene Peterson, *Tell It Slant* p. 58

ⁱⁱⁱ This account is taken from "What Wesley Practiced and Preached about Money" by Charles Edward White <http://www.christianitytoday.com/pastors/1987/winter/8711027.html>

^{iv} See John Wesley, Sermon 50: The Use of Money <http://www.umcmmission.org/Find-Resources/John-Wesley-Sermons/Sermon-50-The-Use-of-Money>

^v John Wesley, Sermon 50: The Use of Money <http://www.umcmmission.org/Find-Resources/John-Wesley-Sermons/Sermon-50-The-Use-of-Money>

^{vi} Rev. Greg Jarrell, "There Is Nothing Too Good for the Poor" <https://baptistnews.com/article/there-is-nothing-too-good-for-the-poor/#.WMKyN28rLIV>

^{vii} Adam Hamilton, *Enough* <http://www.adamhamilton.org/books/enough>