

“Storing Up Treasures” – Luke 12:13-21 – August 18, 2019

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In the late 1980s, a movie was released entitled *Wall Street* – perhaps you remember this famous speech made by villain Gordon Gekko at a stockholders’ meeting, just prior to him swooping in on and dismantling a small company. To the assembled crowd, Gecko, played by actor Michael Douglas, affirms, “I am not a destroyer of companies. I am a liberator of them! 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, in all of its forms--greed for life, for money, for love, knowledge--has marked the upward surge of mankind. And greed--you mark my words--will not only save *this company* (Teldar Paper), but that other malfunctioning corporation called the USA.” (monologue found on classicfilms.suite101 website)

During the recession of 2008, the Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd gave a speech entitled, *The Children of Gordon Gekko*. Rudd stated, “It is perhaps time now to admit that we did not learn the full lessons of the greed-is-good ideology. And today we are still cleaning up the mess of the 21st Century children of Gordon Gekko.” (from Wikipedia website, “Gordon Gekko”) It does not take an economist to see that the greed of some can have a detrimental effect on others.

Jesus certainly was not a fan of greed. In our passage from Luke’s gospel, Jesus tells the parable of the Rich Fool. This parable describes a man who is more concerned with hoarding excess wealth for himself than with striving for God’s realm. We live in a culture here in the United States where the amassing of goods and possessions is seen as the ultimate goal for success. I’m currently reading a book that describes how life in the US following World War 2 pushed us into this consumer culture - the rise of the suburbs and the mentality of “keeping up with the Joneses.” That, in fact, the buying of goods was seen as the duty of a patriotic citizen because it stoked the capitalistic economy. And the Boomer Generation grew up with this ideology. (*Faith Formation in a Secular Age*, Andrew Root, 2017)

When it comes to acquiring stuff, the message that comes to us from all around still seems to be this idea that “greed is good.” The acquisition of things will lead to contentment and happiness. Or so we are told.

The problem seems to be that, if we rely on our possessions to fulfill us, we can never have quite enough. There is always more to be had. A nicer car, a bigger home, the latest electronic gadgets, the most fashionable clothes, the best schools for our kids. It seems like the more that people have, the more that they want to possess. Enough is never enough. The problem with greed is that it causes us to focus on ourselves – my things – I, me, mine. When we focus so much on ourselves, we cannot focus on others or on God.

Our sin of greed stands in stark contrast to the doctrine of providence. Providence tells us that God cares for and tends to the needs of both the rich and the poor. Greed tells us we have to amass it for ourselves, instead of relying on God to provide for our needs.

The parable that Jesus tells is about a rich farmer who one season has a bumper crop. His harvest is so big, he doesn't even have enough space to store the produce. Instead of considering selling the excess harvest or even sharing with those who might be hungry, he decides that he wants to keep it all for himself. Perhaps he's thinking about the bottom line. With such a glut on the market, the price of his produce will go down. If he stores it and waits for a leaner time, the profits will go back up. And so he rips down his old barns and builds newer, bigger ones.

Now let's pause for a moment, because the question comes up – is it wrong to store up excess in order to be ready for a future need? What about putting aside a stash of supplies and food to be prepared for a harsh winter? Or keeping extras on hand for the unforeseen emergency? What about putting aside money for retirement, or keeping a rainy-day fund, or even stashing some extra cash in the freezer “just in case?” Isn't it prudent to be proactive in the face of future uncertainty?

Compare this with the Old Testament story of Joseph who told the Pharaoh that his dream meant that there would be seven years of famine following seven years of plenty. So Joseph warned the Pharaoh he had better store up enough grain during the rich years to be ready for the drought that was coming so there would be enough food for everyone. Doesn't this farmer in the parable have a right to “eat, drink, and be merry” in celebration of his good fortune?

Certainly, saving for future needs is one form of stewarding the resources that God has provided for us. There are and will be good times and bad, and so saving up for the bad times is a good use of one's current resources. However, this must be balanced with our call to both give back to God and also, to care for our neighbors. Our stuff is not our own to do with as we will. Acknowledging God's generous gifts to us, we give back a portion to God. Furthermore, we are to share our bounty with those who are poor and in need. The majority of people in the world do not have access to near the resources that we have, and we it is only right to share our abundance with them – especially to those who lack even the basic means for survival.

The farmer in the parable cares nothing about giving back to God or sharing with his neighbors. He is not cognizant of the fact that his bounty comes from God, nor does he care for his fellow humans who are going without. His concern is only for himself. This is especially evident by the repeated use of the first-person pronouns – I, me, my. He even speaks directly to himself, not to anyone else. He only cares for himself. He thinks nothing of those

who don't even have access to land to grow crops – who have to rely on the kindness of those who do possess the resources. Everything belongs to him – my crops, my land, my goods, my barns.

This man has succumbed to the trap of idolatry. He is caught up in the excess, and he finds his worth in his possessions. He would fit in well with our society, measuring his status parallel to his abundance. He would be celebrated as a success story, living in the fancy part of town, and encouraged to amass still more wealth and goods. He idolizes his wealth, and gives no thought to those who are in need, except perhaps to say, that if “those people want to succeed in life, a little hard work is all they need, instead of sitting around waiting for a handout.” He resorts to generalizations instead of actually seeing the plight of those who live in poverty.

This trap of idolizing our possessions is an easy one to fall into. We enjoy having nice things and we see our goods as a reward for all our hard work. We have been surrounded all our lives by the message that acquiring wealth is a good, positive goal to seek. We find our worth in our wealth. It gives us a sense of security, that we have something tangible to hold onto. But then the problem becomes fear. Once we have amassed our goods, we fear losing them. We idolize our stuff and then worry about keeping it safe. Our possessions begin to possess us and control us. And we lose perspective.

In the parable, God spoke to the man, chastising him for losing sight of true worth. He is caught up in his selfishness, concerned only for his goods. He is focused on amassing treasures for himself instead of being rich toward God. When we are rich toward God, we recognize that all good things have their ultimate source in God. Our material blessings are gifts from God, to be used to glorify God, not for our own selfish desires. God cares for us and loves us. God also cares and loves for others. Contrary to what we see all around us in our society, we are called not to amass riches for ourselves, but instead we are called to be rich toward God. Sharing what we have with those who do without. Loving and caring for our neighbors in need. Acknowledging our blessedness as a gift from God. As we grow in our relationship to Jesus Christ, may we all learn to seek this form of wealth.