

Curing Greed
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Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

Today's gospel lesson is Luke 12:13-21. It's about greed and I'll get to it in a few minutes but first I want to tell you a story about Paula's and my twin granddaughters whom we visited in Albuquerque this past June. They are Paula and Angie, namesakes of their grandmothers. This is a story of the birth of greed in one of said twins when they were just 21 months old.

Paula and Angie were born with no sense of self or selfishness. They gladly share everything and claim nothing as their own private possession. It's "one for all; all for one." They were born with no impulse to hoard or keep anything from the other. It's "you win, I win"; not "I win, you lose."

There are two matching rocking horses but you can't tell which is whose because there's no personal pronouns at work. It's share and share alike. For heaven's sake they even share blankies and pacifiers. Of course there are tussles now and then but no prolonged protests of "this is mine and you can't have it."

This is what is called "the age of innocence." And it ended one particular afternoon this past June at about 3:00 in the afternoon. At that moment Paula and I witnessed one of the twins (who shall remain unidentified) leave the age of innocence.

At first it looked like just another of many random snatchings of the pacifier from the other's mouth, which up until then always got resolved within five seconds. The snatcher would push a pacifier back into the whaling mouth of the snatchee and all would be well again. But on this particular occasion the snatcher hesitated a long, knowing moment, coldly contemplated the agony in her sibling's face, and then slowly and deliberately placed the pacifier behind her back as if to say: *perhaps two pacifiers are better than one*. In that moment something dawned on her: *I have power over sister*.

And thus greed was born in an otherwise perfect child.

We are not born in sin. Sin is born in us once we discover the power to hurt another by what we say or do or by what we don't say or do. Greed relies on such power.

Curing greed is like curing ham. If you're not careful you just might make it even tastier, which brings us to the gospel lesson for today.

Someone in the crowd said to Jesus, "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me."

It could have been the other twin—*tell my sister to share!*--but it wasn't. In this gospel lesson it's a man with a grievance against his brother, two siblings in one particular family.

Jesus refused to play the role of mediator or financial advisor. "Friend, who made me a judge or arbitrator over you?" Instead Jesus told a story on the dangers of greed. It can tear families apart.

"Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me."

In the gospel lesson it's a man with a grievance against a brother but it could have been Haiti or Somali or one of several dozen destitute nations within the family of nations

asking for relief or fairness. *Jesus, tell my American brothers and sisters to divide the global family inheritance with me.*

In a world of great abundance and a great gap between rich and poor nations, it's a question that comes up often. How can the world be put right and just? Christians and others have proposed solutions from free trade to less consumption to foreign debt forgiveness. [See "Social Creed of the 21st Century" from the National Council of Churches.]

Jesus was asked to make a financial ruling. He refused to treat the matter legally. Instead he told a story about the dangers of greed. Greed can tear the world apart.

"Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me."

In the gospel lesson it's a man with a grievance against a brother but it could have been a worker within our own nation. It could be workers seeking a fair share from the CEO who makes 500 times more money what floor workers make.

In this "one nation, under God, indivisible with liberty and justice for all" that "brother" in the gospel could be black or brown or any other American born into unequal circumstances. Yes, we may be equal in terms of dignity but we are not all born into equal circumstances.

This is, of course, a perennial, historic and universal fact of life. Some religious and political systems say: *tough luck! That's the breaks. Accept your fate and make the best of it. In heaven things will be made right.* The Judeo Christian tradition doesn't say that, at least not at its best. Our tradition is devoted to raising up the downtrodden, to making the way less difficult, caring for all people as one family of God.

Tell my rich brother and sister to divide the American family inheritance with me.

In a nation of great abundance and with a great and growing gap between rich and poor, it's a question that comes up often. How can our nation make things right and just? It's a question raised in *To Do Justice: A Guide for Progressive Christians*. One chapter is on income taxes. What kind of tax rate structure should Christians advocate—regressive, flat or progressive? I'm not going to say: "Who would Jesus tax" because that's silly and not very helpful in complicated situations.

I was surprised to learn that following WWII and into the 1950s the wealthiest of Americans were taxed 90% on income over \$200,000—about \$2 million in today's dollars. In 1962 President John Kennedy reduced the upper bracket to 70%. Today it is 35%.

I don't know but I'm wondering if at one time wealthy Americans gladly paid such high taxes because they were so grateful to a country and government that provided security, research and development funds, infrastructure, schools, roads, stable currency, and so much more that enabled them to become wealthy in the first place. If so, that would be so different from the voices we sometimes hear these days: *Nobody helped me. I made it all on my own. It was me, myself and I alone! Why should I or the government help anyone else?*

I recently heard of a group of well-off Americans heading up a movement called "Please, Raise My Taxes" based in part on the notion that without this country's resources and infrastructure they would not have succeeded. The Bible does say: *from those to whom much has been given, much shall be required.* But does that apply to tax codes?

Jesus declined to arbitrate such disputes. "Friend, who made me a judge or arbitrator over you?" Instead he told a story on the dangers of greed, leaving us to figure things out on

our own in our time, place and circumstances.

“Take care!” Jesus said. “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 demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?’

So it is, said Jesus, with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God.”

Did you notice a small but telling point: the rich man consulted himself and himself alone. He didn’t pray: *thy kingdom come*. He didn’t pray: *thy desires be done on earth for all your children*. He didn’t pray: *give us our daily bread*. He didn’t pray: *help us resist the temptation to keep it all for ourselves*.

He didn’t consult his neighbors or community of faith. He didn’t see a world beyond himself. He saw only himself. He didn’t see the world as God sees the world.

Yes, abundance may come in money and things. But it’s not just about things. It’s also about influence, time, strength, or spare room.

What do you have in abundance?

What are you doing with it?

One way leads to death. The other way leads to life.

Seeing the world as God sees the world may be the best cure for greed.