

The many species of greed

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"I considered all that my hands had done and the toil I had spent in doing it, and again, all was vanity and a chasing after wind ..." Ecclesiastes 1:11

Put to death, therefore, whatever in you is earthly These are the ways you also once followed, when you were living that life Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him. Colossians 5,7,14,15b-17

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." Luke 12:13-21

A National Geographic story that I read this past week explained that there are about 12,000 species of freshwater fish in the world. I would no doubt have forgotten the fact except that the same day I started preparing for this message, and I came across a commentary on today's text from Luke's gospel that was titled, *The Many Species of Greed*.¹

That commentary focused on just one verse from the gospel: "[Jesus] said *"Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed ..."* Here Jesus himself suggests that there are many species of greed. He implies that none of them are any good for any of us.

One species of greed is exhibited by "*someone in the crowd [who] said to Jesus, "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me."* I've often called this species of greed *inheritance-itis*. You may have known people afflicted by it. They spend decades of their lives on hold. They won't really be living until they come into the family money. Often when the time does come, all hell breaks loose.

My father-in-law, a lawyer, often saw all hell breaking loose in his estate planning practice. He was mentored by an old codger who had seen it all and who often boasted: "*Give me an old rug and a hundred dollars and I can divide any family in America.*" It's funny. And it's also spiritually tragic, as I'm sure many of us have seen, and as Jesus well knew.

Some of you here already know that my 92-year-old mother, Loisjean, died in California two days ago, on Friday. You can appreciate how this scene in today's gospel seems eerily timely and poignant for me. On the last day of my last visit with my mother, a week ago, my sister and I were in the living room of my mother's apartment. We naturally got to wondering about what would happen to her things. I mentioned a tattered but valuable old book, a family history and genealogy that had belonged to my mother's father. My sister urged me, "*Just take it! No one's going to want that.*" And so I did.

Three days later, back here in Chicago with the book, my sister calls: "*I just got off the phone with brother Steve. As far as mom's apartment goes, Steve says that he doesn't want anything ... at all ... except for that family genealogy book ..."*

There it is, right?

In the gospel scene, Jesus does not intervene in the family's division. He in fact recuses himself: "*Friend, who set me to be a judge or arbitrator over you?*" And then Jesus expands his audience. We don't know how many were there. But the text does tell us it was a crowd. And even though Jesus won't intervene in one family's inheritance drama, he recognizes a teachable moment. The complaint must have riveted everyone's attention. *Money!* Something we all think about, worry about, wish we had more of, wonder where it's coming from and when and from whom.

So Jesus expands his audience to all who will listen, "*Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.*" He goes on to provide an illustration. We now call it the Parable of the Rich Fool. How would you describe his species of greed? It seems to be classic sort, archetypal-driven by acquisition and suffused with hubris. He fails to take into account his mortality and the prospect of sudden death. "*It will never happen to me.*"

He reminds me, in fact, of a rich man I'd known in one parish, a successful clinician in a psychiatric hospital. He lived in a neighborhood that any of us here might envy. He immersed himself in the most tasteful and sophisticated cultural and musical offerings. I knew him as a regular and faithful member of the church. But five years after I had served that parish as interim rector and moved on, he called and explained that he had cancer and a dire prognosis. And you could say that he was becoming aware of the different species of greed to which he'd devoted himself: "*I have done everything in life, had it all, but I don't feel I've really addressed the spiritual, and now I realize that it's all that really matters. But I don't even know how to begin. I have so many regrets.*"

We are fortunate that all of this morning's appointed texts support the same message. They issue similar cautions. They point us in the same direction. The Teacher of Ecclesiastes recounts his own explorations and disappointments with various species of greed – taking part in more and more diverse and alluring pleasures, and also acquiring "*great possessions ... more than any[one] before me ...*"

"*All was vanity,*" he concludes, "*and a chasing after wind.*"

His muse about his life could be called secular or existential today. By contrast, the approach in the appointed passage from Colossians is explicitly spiritual, grounded in the notion of our dying to the flesh that we rightly know Christ and may rise to eternal life. "*Put to death... whatever in you is earthly ... the ways you ... once followed, when you were living that life.*" Do you remember *that life?* – the anxiety, the need for approval, taking your signals from the latest gravitational pull.

But now, "*Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.*" And then the author commends the priceless gift of gratitude: "*be thankful.*" And don't forget the eternal treasure at the heart of our faith: "*Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly.*"

It all sounds so compelling, so right, so wise, so promising – until some new species of greed comes knocking on our door.

To briefly return to the Rich Fool in today's gospel: his dilemma may seem foreign to many of us, and we can therefore discount the relevance of this gospel. I don't know many Ascension members who are building more and bigger barns. I do know many who are materially struggling, wondering how to get by on very limited resources, frightened and ashamed by mounting debt.

So I suppose I find the notion of many species of greed compelling because, whatever our circumstances, we can all ask: "*What species of greed is presently knocking on my door?*" In my case, for instance, there's a family genealogy. I guess I'll be shipping it off to my brother soon ...

Whether it be inheritance-itis or acquisition or indulgence in pleasures or your own personal demon or concoction – we can all wonder about our attachments, our ulcers, our manipulation to get what we want, our wishful thinking about a future that may or may not be. The species of greed that needs your attention, or mine, is whatever is eating us alive, whatever is keeping us from more completely following Jesus, more completely letting the word of Christ dwell in us richly, more completely loving God and neighbor. *Amen.*

¹ A pastoral blog (without author attribution) from Emmanuel Free Church, Spring Lake, MI, www.efcspringlake.org.