

“Greed - The Great Treasure Hunt”

In 1987, Harper's Magazine, recognizing the lure of these temptations, asked leading Madison Avenue advertising firms to develop ad campaigns promoting the Seven Deadly Sins. The ad for Greed features a picture of Santa Claus, with the headline “The world’s foremost authority speaks out on the subject of greed.” Surrounded by letters, all begin with the phrase “Dear Santa, I want...” The image has Santa looking up over his glasses while a side caption comments, “Do you remember all the things you told me you wanted as a child? Well, your list may have changed, but I bet it hasn’t gotten any shorter.”

Perhaps one of the easiest to identify and name is the Sin of Greed. It is perhaps the most obvious, the most noticeable. It doesn’t linger in the shadows like Lust or Gluttony, it’s not disengaged like Sloth, and it’s not masked in the way that Pride or Eve are. When someone is Greedy we notice it. We notice this because Greed is always at the expense of someone else. Greed is, in a way, a very public Sin, because the results of Greed are obvious. It’s hard to hide our hoarding.

Greed is also a self-perpetuating Sin, for Greed’s longings are never satisfied. Greed in many ways couldn’t care less about enjoying its spoils. Greed pursues *accumulation*. Greed is the desire to possess more than I need, because of fear...a fitting personification of Greed is Ebenezer Scrooge, from the Dickens Classic, A Christmas Carol. Scrooge, who sat alone at night with a single candle to light his cold bedroom. “Darkness is cheap,” wrote Charles Dickens, “and Scrooge liked it.”

Greed hardens our hearts; it is fully content to decimate — or leave decimated — the lives of others, as long as a bank account, garage, or pantry with our name on it fills up somewhere.

Greed is more than the accumulation of wealth, at its worst, Greed changes the focus of our worship.

To worship is to ascribe worth to something, to give it value. We gather to worship God on Sunday mornings because we believe God is worth honouring. When we focus our attention elsewhere; when we focus our love elsewhere, away from God and onto the treasures in our

lives; the things we desire and obsess over, we shift the object of our worship. Greed crafts idols of the things we desire and in our obsession, leads us to idolatry, that is, the worship of false Gods.

Greed is a condition of the heart. Greed adores goods that are temporary and rejects those that are everlasting. Greed does not care about living well in the present, because greed focuses on the future, and the future is a place of fear — fear that I will not have enough for tomorrow, fear that somehow the God who gives me each breath will stop providing if I do not squirrel away all that I can.

When speaking about Greed, Jesus often focused here: “Therefore, I say to you, don’t worry about your life, what you will eat, or about your body, what you will wear. There is more to life than food and more to the body than clothing. Consider the ravens: they neither plant nor harvest, they have no silo or barn, yet God feeds them. You are worth so much more than birds!” (Luke 12:22-24)

We will hear these words echoed in our service today as words of reassurance. Jesus spoke about Greed more than any other Sin, and this is no coincidence, money was also a favourite topic of Jesus. He consistently addressed the human desire to possess and hoard, to place hope in fleeting resources and not in the God of heaven. And of those with much, Jesus often had the harshest of critiques. He even said that the affluent — those who have not shared what God has given them with the desperately impoverished — are a wretched lot. (Luke 6:24)

And in our scripture this morning Jesus offers a parable as a warning against greed.

A certain rich man’s land produced a bountiful crop. He said to himself, What will I do? I have no place to store my harvest! Then he thought, Here’s what I’ll do. I’ll tear down my barns and build bigger ones. That’s where I’ll store all my grain and goods. I’ll say to myself, You have stored up plenty of goods, enough for several years. Take it easy! Eat, drink, and enjoy yourself.

There are two takeaways for me here. The first is the reality is that Greed prevents us from saying we have stored up plenty of goods, enough for several years. I doubt the rich man will every be able to have big enough barns, I doubt they will ever have enough stored up, because Greed doesn’t understand enough. Instead, Greed will tell us that are barns aren’t big enough, that we could use another grain silo. And isn’t this the line of thinking we run down, whether it

be with a home or a car, bank account, retirement savings, or this or that, they're never big enough. And perhaps, we're satisfied, for a while, but something always comes up where we need something bigger, and we ever get to the place where we can say, I'm done, I have stored up enough...because there is never enough. We will always want for more. And, know that I'm preaching to myself here, more than anyone else. This is my weakness, my Sin, and so I speak from experience.

In our greed, we are blinded from seeing all that we have. Greed isn't concerned with where our precious treasures, our valuables come from. Greed is only concerned with getting more, hoarding more, collecting more. And it will never be satisfied. Not now, not ever, because there's always another treasure to be had, another thing missing, another precious thing to persevere on.

“Generosity - A Community of Abundance”

If Greed has a physical posture is arms embracing and holding in, then Charity is one where arms are open. If Greed operates from a place of insecurity, Charity then, is the opposite and operates from a place of security. If Greed is consumed with there never being enough, Charity is consumed with how to share our more than enough.

I see Charity and Generosity intertwined. They aren't the same; some dictionaries link Charity to Philanthropy, and by that logic, Generosity would be the method of offering Charity. I see them tied together, and, I see both as opposing forces to that of Greed. And I see Charity and Generosity as shaping our hearts.

Jesus is concerned with matters of the heart. Jesus, rightly, sees Greed as coming from a place where our hearts are afraid of what's to come. I think of the Israelites in the desert, when they're told to gather only what they need for the day, and not for tomorrow. If they gather an excess it spoils. God is teaching lessons of trust, of understanding enough. Jesus too, in our scripture is trying to teach us about trust; trusting in God's enough, and trusting in God to meet our needs. Charity and Generosity impact our hearts; the act of sharing the gifts of God with the world, opens our hearts further.

Practicing Charity and Generosity in our lives pushes back the anxiety of Greed, loudly proclaiming that we trust that we have enough. Charity and Generosity also realign our understanding of what we have; that our possessions are not ours to hoard and keep, rather they're meant to be shared; we receive them as gifts, and we share them in a like spirit. Perhaps the most tangible way we can practice Charity and Gerosity is simply this; tithing.

In our act of tithing, we do what God's people have done for millennia, we return the first fruits to God. We recognize that what we have, what we have received, is not solely from the sweat of our brow or the will of our spirits; rather we recognize that all that we have comes from God, is a gift from God. And in tithing, we recognize that, and return a portion to God with trust and gratefulness. Trust that what we have is enough, and gratefulness for the gifts that we receive on a regular basis.

The remedy for Greed is to “give money away every week and to give our best. To spend on ourselves first and then to give away what remains, either rot God or to others, is to remain in the mindset that our possessions are really our own to dispense as we see fit and that we are

the ultimate providers for ourselves. Tithing first, and spending on ourselves later, is a discipline that teaches God's ownership of all good things and trust in God's provision, as we all as a stewardship of goods that does not put ourselves first."¹

In the past, tithing has, I think, been given a bad wrap. Where in the past it's been used as a strict practice; give 10% of your income, no if, ands, or buts; I think that a little reformation is in order to help re-appreciate the power of tithing. I don't believe that the point of tithing is to be a rigid code of behaviour to conform to. Rather, I believe that the gift of tithing is in its regularity, so that we can re-form and re-orient our hearts so that we learn to give, not because we ought to, but, instead, from a posture of gratitude and joy and love.

Generosity is not a given, rather, Generosity must be taught. We need to learn how to practice it, and for those of us with proclivities toward Greed, it's an even more difficult lesson to learn. I remember as a child, the glee that I had when I was given the opportunity to place our offering envelope in the offering place. I remember in Sunday School we regularly took a 'collection' at the beginning, our money usually went to some child sponsorship or another. In hindsight, I saw that this was Generosity being taught. I see that happening here in different ways. Each month, our food collection is a way we teach generosity to the next generation. The Jr. Church Soap Collection for MCC this past Advent are some examples of teaching Generosity, and Charity to our next generation.

Greed ultimately is a fear, rooted in a sense of scarcity, and so it hoards. Charity re-orient us from the hoarding of Greed. Where Greed is consumed with gathering enough for self, Charity encourages us to reflect the generosity of our creator. Where Greed is unable to see enough, Charity closely notices when we have enough. When Greed says let's store up more, Charity asks, what can we do with our excess.

Charity fundamentally re-orient the way that we view our possessions. Charity changes our hearts' orientation. It reorients our love from an inward hoarding of God's gifts to an outward sharing of God's good gifts, grace and love.

"The freedom to give generously and to live free from anxiety (of which Greed thrills to create), is founded on the conviction that not just our things but our very selves, belong to God. To

¹ Vices, pg. 114.

claim all that is ours as “the gifts of God for the people of God” is to relearn and rediscover a creation to be gratefully celebrated, rather than be consumed by Greed.”²

Amen.

² Vices pg. 116.