
Be on Your Guard Against All Kinds of Greed

A sermon by Canon Cathy Zappa
Proper 13 – Year C

When we meet Jesus in our Gospel this morning, he's got a crowd of thousands gathered around him, seeking healing and listening to his teaching. For those of us just tuning in, he's been telling his disciples not to fear those who can hurt the body, but rather to fear—to reverence—God, and to trust the Holy Spirit. "Take the sparrow," he was just saying, "which seems insignificant to you, because we sell them for next to nothing. Still, God knows every one of them. But you, every hair on your head is counted—you're of much more value than many sparrows—so don't be afraid!"

This is a harder teaching than it sounds; and as they're digesting it, someone yells out from the crowd, "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me!" "Tell my brother," because I don't want to talk to him myself. "And I'll stop worrying," I imagine him objecting, "Once I'm secure, and have what my brother has."

Now, according to the inheritance customs of the time, a family's estate would go to the eldest son, leaving his siblings to find another livelihood. So it's reasonable to assume this is a younger brother, who covets a share of his brother's inheritance—and of his brother's life.

Jesus, seeing the slippery slope he's on, tells him to be on guard against all kinds of greed, and reminds him that life doesn't consist of the abundance of possessions. Then, Jesus drives his point home with a parable, about a rich farmer, who's been blessed with a bumper crop. But because the farmer has been so wisely and responsibly storing his harvests, he's run out of storage space.

So, what are his options? Well, he can trust in this abundance and share it with others, and start living the life he's been saving for, now. Or, he can insist that he still doesn't have enough, and keep it all for himself.

It's a critical decision—a life-or-death matter for his soul, and perhaps for someone else, too, who needs what he has. Yet, he consults no one, but his soul. Perhaps, he's driven others away—convinced he doesn't need them—or suspicious that they want something from him, or will challenge his way of life.

Regardless, consulting only himself, it's not surprising that he decides to save it, by building bigger barns to store, as he says, "all *my* grain and *my* goods." *All* of this fruit of the earth, which the *land* produced, and for which he shows no gratitude.

But he puts off sharing, and living, one day too long, for this very night, his life will be demanded of him. The Greek word translated here as "life" is *psyche*, which also means "soul." His *soul* is being demanded of him, too.

In spite of all he's done to protect himself, he's still mortal. Sure, he'll leave behind more goods and grain than he knows what to do with, but he'll die alone—his soul his only companion—if he hasn't already lost that, too.

So, with this short parable, Jesus exposes the spiritual dangers of greed—of always wanting more, and clinging to what you have: isolation, distrust, discontent, ungratefulness, and bondage to possessions, to name a few. Yet, though we all know that avarice is dangerous and sinful, it's not so easy to break free from.

When I've tried to do it myself, I've often just redirected my acquisitiveness toward something else, less material and more

meaningful: activities instead of name brand clothes; education instead of a bigger house; a family trip instead of a pile of new toys. But isn't this just more of the same?

Jesus calls us to dig deeper—to take a hard look at our striving and desiring—and ask what's behind it all. When I take that look at myself, I see fear. Fear that I don't have enough or am not doing enough. Fear that I don't measure up. Fear that I have to take care of myself.

And there's a whole marketing and consumer culture ready to reinforce my insecurity—to persuade me that I *do* need more—that I need to *be* more—if I want to be of any value at all.

Our Colossians reading goes so far as to call greed a form of idolatry. Idolatry, which simply means putting trust in anything other than the one, true, living God, and expecting from it what only God can give: meaning, peace, salvation, eternal life.

Calling greed idolatry also suggests a way out: rather than trying to establish our own value, and make our own meaning, we can look to God—and take a leap of faith in God's abundance and masterful handiwork, evident in each of us. We can believe Jesus, when he says we're more than our possessions and accomplishments.

This is what Jesus was saying right before our gospel passage, and it's what he says right after it too, because we apparently need to hear it more than once. "Therefore," he continues, wrapping up the parable and picking up where he left off, "don't worry about what you'll eat or wear, for life is more than food. Just look at the ravens: they neither sow nor reap—have neither storehouse nor barn—yet God feeds them. Of how much more value are you than they!"

And that's just it. Jesus wants us to know that we're valuable already. We're precious to God, already. God has procured our salvation, already, so we don't need to scramble and compete for worthiness or love or security. And we don't need to fear.

Instead, Jesus invites us, rest in God, trust in God's love, and receive God's peace—which frees you, in turn, to trust and love and give to others as well—and to live the beautiful life that is, by the grace of God, yours, today.