

An Antidote for Greed

Luke 12:13-21

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“How Much Land Does a Man Need?”

That’s the title of a short story written by Leo Tolstoy and first published in 1886.

In it he tells the story of man who was told that he could have as much land as he could run around in a single day. He set off to encircle his plot of land. As the day wore on, the circle got larger and larger. Compelled by the thought of all the land he would own he kept widening the circumference of the circle, stride by stride, mile by mile, until at sunset he staggered and dropped dead of a heart attack.

How much land does a man need?

The last line of the story says, “His servant picked up the spade and dug a grave long enough for him to lie in, and buried him in it. Six feet from his head to his heels was all he needed.”

It’s the story of greed; of persons and nations run to death by greed.

In traditional Christian thought, greed is numbered as one of the seven deadly sins. Tolstoy took that literally in his short story. But he’s not the only one who has seen and taught about the deadly effects of greed.

“Be on your guard against all kinds of greed,” said Jesus, “for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of possessions” (Luke 12:15).

Two brothers had been squabbling over their inheritance and made the mistake of asking Jesus to be their judge and help settle their dispute. Instead, Jesus told them a parable:

“The land of a rich man produced a bumper crop,” he said. “And the man thought to himself, ‘I don’t have enough barns to store all my crops. What am I going to do? I know what I’ll do! I’m gonna pull down my old barns and build bigger ones, so that I can store all my goods. And then I’ll say to my self, “Self, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.””

But God said, “You fool. This very night your life will be demanded of you. And all the things you have prepared, whose will they be?” (Luke 12:16-20).

How much land does a person need? How much wealth? How much stuff?

We live in culture that would suggest that you can *never* have enough. There is always one more thing that you need to make your life complete — one more car, one more

flatscreen TV, one more pair of shoes, a house with one more bathroom, one more box of girl scout cookies, one more drink... that's all I need. Then I'll be happy...

When I was a kid, back before Amazon had taken over everything, just before Christmas each year, we would get a thick 500 or so page magazine in the mail – the Sears “Wish Book.” I would wait with eager anticipation for its arrival, and on the glorious day that it finally arrived, I'd spend hours pouring over its pages, circling every item I wanted for Christmas and writing my name next to it, so that my parents would know which of their four children was hoping for it. I'd dog-ear the corners of the pages containing the items I most coveted, and then I'd conveniently leave the “Wish Book” by the chair in the kitchen where mom would have her morning coffee.

Now, I didn't come from a home that had much money. My parents taught me early and often that greed was wrong. They taught me to be grateful for what we had and to share generously. But that didn't stop me from circling nearly every toy in that magazine and dreaming about how much better my life would be if I got that new bike... that 5 gallon tin of popcorn... that Nintendo Power Glove... and that giant gum ball machine. Then, I'd be the envy of the neighborhood. Then, everyone would want my life.

My parents didn't teach me greed, but that didn't stop me from discovering it all on my own in our consumer-driven culture. I wanted it *all*.

In Moliere's play on avarice, the greedy hero has the name “harpagon” which is derived from the Latin *harpe*, meaning claw or sickle. With greed, arms and hands are turned into grappling hooks.

Other sins have animals attached to them – proud as a peacock, angry as a bull. If we were to choose an animal to depict greed, maybe it would be the octopus, all those arms grabbing and wrapping around things and pulling them close to us. Hugging tightly to what we think is ours. When we are infected with greed, *we want it all*.

Too often in the sermons I have heard preached on this parable, the preacher has gone out of the way to portray the man as a villain – he somehow got rich by cheating the system or by acquiring his land illegally or by abusing his workers.

But the thing is, as Jesus tells it, the man in the parable wasn't crooked. He wasn't evil. There's nothing in this story that suggests that he got his wealth by cheating others or that he came by it dishonestly. In other words, this isn't the story of Bernie Madoff or “The Wolf of Wall Street.” And there's nothing in the story that suggests that he mistreated his workers.

He just has a stroke of good fortune. “The *land*... produced abundantly.” He just had a good year. Sun and water and soil – things he had no control over – combined in just the right way. So the land produced abundantly. A good year. A bumper crop. A stroke of good fortune.

The problem in this parable isn't with *how* he got his wealth. Rather, it's *what* he does with it once he's got it. Or maybe more accurately what he *doesn't* do with it.

Namely, he doesn't share it. He doesn't give it away. He doesn't put it good use serving others. Like an octopus, he wraps his arms around it and keeps it *all* for himself.

Have you noticed the man's language?

"What should *I* do, for *I* have no place to store *my* crops? *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* self, Self, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry."

Did you hear those pronouns?

"I, I, my, I, I, my, I, my, my, I, my, my self, Self..." In this parable, thirteen of sixty-one words refer to I, me, and mine.

The man is totally *self*-absorbed. Sitting in his splendid isolation he even prays not to God, but to *himself*: "Self, you have ample goods laid up for many years; you deserve to relax, to eat all you want, to drink all you can, and to be merry without a care for anyone else."

Rev. Barbara Lundblad says it like this: "This man's world is so small that he talks only to himself!" ("Beyond Myself," *A Sermon for Every Sunday*, Aug. 4, 2019).

He has no connections beyond himself. He has no memory of the God who commanded the people of Israel to leave grain at the edges of the field for the sojourners and widows. He can't see beyond the edges of his own fields nor does he wonder if there are some people who have no grain at all. This man is isolated in a world he created for himself. The land is *his*. The barns are *his*. The grain is *his* and the goods are *his*. He has no neighbor, and he has no need of God.

In other parts of Luke, Jesus will say things like, "You can't serve both God and mammon" (Luke 16:13).

Mammon is a unique word in scripture. It stands apart from words like "rich" and "wealth," because in biblical parlance mammon is the word Jesus used when wealth had taken the place of God in someone's life.

That is why all greed, rightly understood, is ultimately a form of idolatry.

H. Stephen Shoemaker once defined greed like this: "Greed is the love of possessing that orders the self around possessions and closes its door to the neighbor and to God" (*The Jekyll and Hyde Syndrome*, 76).

It is, then, when the priorities of our lives become mis-ordered... or maybe, even, *disordered*.

The land was *his*. The barns were *his*. The grain was *his* and the goods were *his*. He has no neighbor, and he has no need of God. His life had become *disordered*.

When asked what the greatest commandment was, Jesus replied: "Earn you keep. And the second is like it: keep what's yours."

No. He said, "Love God with everything you've got. And the second is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself."

But when greed takes hold of us, we can't see our neighbor. We can only see our *things* and how we can accumulate more things for ourselves.

That's what happened to the hero of our story. He was given more than he could possibly use, and instead of sharing it he kept it all for himself. He didn't lie or cheat or steal to get those crops. He didn't abuse his workers. He just had a stroke of good fortune. So, God does not call him evil. God calls him a *fool*. Why a fool? Because greed keeps him from sharing the blessing. Instead he hoards it for himself.

"You fool!" says God. "This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?"

Someone pointed out to me that, actually, the Greek reads: "Fool, this very night *they* shall demand your life." *They*? Who is "*they*"? I think "*they*" are *the things*.

The story closes with the question, "And whose will *they* be?" He thought the things were his opportunity, his good fortune, his insurance for an easy life. But, surprise! He didn't have the things. *They* had him.

And isn't that exactly how greed works? We think we have our things, when actually our things have us. They don't free us. They enslave us.

So how do we resist greed? How do we combat it?

I think the instinctual answer is something like charity. Make it a discipline to give to the causes and organizations that you believe in. Money isn't an end in itself. It's a tool meant to serve a purpose. So don't hoard your money. Put it to use like the tool it was always meant to be. Don't get it just to hold onto it. Give it away. Put it to work. Drop it in the offering plate!

I think something like that is the instinctual answer, but I want to suggest a different way forward.

While greed looks like an external problem, because it has to do with our dis-ordered relationship with things and things are outside of us, the truth is that it's a problem of the interior.

In our parable, the man prays to *himself*: "Self, you have ample goods laid up for years; relax, eat, drink, be merry."

What if instead of praying to himself, he had prayed to *God*?

What if he'd said, "God, you have given me more than I alone could ever use. What would you have me do with this abundant harvest?"

What if he had said, "God, *you* have blessed me. How now would you have me bless others?"

The Catholic writer and mystic, Carlo Carretto, tells this story:

Here at [the monastery in western Algeria], during the winter, nomads often arrive with their tents. They are the poorest of people: they no longer have any camels or goats to sell, no longer the strength to organize caravans...

One day a French woman, who was making a retreat here, was walking beside one of these tents. She stopped to pass the time of day and, as she did so, realized that a young girl, thin as a rake, was trembling with cold. "Why don't you cover yourself up?" she asked.

"Because I've nothing to cover myself with," replied the girl.

The French woman, without going to the roots of the problem, went... to pray.

She entered the hermitage where the Blessed Sacrament was exposed. She prostrated herself on the floor in the sand before the presence of Jesus in the Eucharist, and began to pray.

Some time passed. She sought contact with the Eternal One. She tried to pray.

"I couldn't go on," she told him afterwards. "I couldn't pray. I had to go out, back to the tent, and give that child one of my sweaters. Then I returned, and then I was able to pray."

He concludes by saying this: "If you pray, if you pray seriously, if you pray in truth, it will be God Himself who will send you out, with greater strength, with greater love, towards your brothers and sisters, so that you may love them ore gratuitously and serve them more delicately."

He says, "It is impossible to pray to a personal God and remain indifferent to your suffering brothers and sisters... Anyone who prays without suffering for the suffering is praying to a pole, a shade, but not to the living God" (*The God Who Comes*, 178-179).

What if he had prayed to God rather than himself?

But here's the thing — he's not real. He was just a story Jesus told to make a point. So the question isn't: "What would have happened if he'd prayed to God rather than himself?"

The right question is much closer to home, I'm afraid. The right question is: "What might happen if we do?"

Amen.