

FEAR LEADS TO...

LUKE 12:13-34
COLOSSIANS 3:1-11

NEW STORE/MAYSVILLE CHURCHES
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To many who lived in and through the Eighties, the words of Gordon Gekko in *Wall Street* were a mantra that echoes from our Gospel reading according to *Luke*. Some of us may remember Gekko's declaration that "greed, for lack of a better word, is good!" That also seems the counterpoint of part of our passage. But, why do we become greedy? What drives our tendency to want more and more? To pit ourselves against family? To pile up more than we can use or sell? I wonder what were the motives behind the man who approached Jesus to ask that Jesus be the judge and arbitrator of his family squabble?

Growing up in a predominately Roman Catholic community, I remember hearing my friends talk about the classes they had to take on Saturdays. One of the things they had to memorize was the major and minor sins according to the Church. We've all probably heard of most of the major ones — the seven cardinal or deadly sins, as they are most commonly known: pride, greed, lust, envy, gluttony, anger, and sloth. And, in good Manichean duality, Roman Catholics have an equal counter-offensive of virtues by which these sins can be overcome: humility, charity, chastity, gratitude, temperance, patience, and diligence. We can easily see evidence of the cardinal sins all around us, but little of the virtues. Perhaps our Reformed Protestant ancestors had it right when they declared all of humanity as totally depraved — that is, so enslaved to the service of sin that apart from the full grace of God is unable to choose to follow God or even choose to turn to Christ in faith for salvation.

Now, before we go too far down that rabbit hole, I want to turn our attention back to our text from *Luke* and what the encounter, the parable, and the interpretation might be saying to us. If we had stopped the Gospel reading at verse 21, then all we might hear is the antithesis to Gekko's mantra: Greed is bad. And, there's nothing bad about acknowledging this teaching. Greed comes from a desire for power, or a fear of not having enough. Many people, by stopping at verse 21, could think that the former reason for greed comes from such a desire, and the point of the passage is that God doesn't like greed. Hoarding one's treasure is not what God wants one to do with it.

To me, that's a bit like saying, "Bad dog! Bad dog!" to your pet after finding a mess on the floor. It's true that the pet did not behave according to your expectations, and such behavior is bad. But, repeatedly saying those words will probably not change its behavior to one you want unless you understand why it did it and

train the dog not to do it next time. To say the passage is solely about greed is, to me, stopping short of a fuller understanding of Jesus' teaching here.

A now deceased seminary professor of mine told us frequently that in reading the New Testament to pay attention to the word, **therefore**.

It was important because it usually signaled a conclusion of thought or teaching. In verse 22, Jesus turns to his disciples and says, "Therefore, I tell you, do not worry about your life..." There is something more going on than the straightforward admonition against greed.

What do we fear? Death? A terminal disease? The loss of the use of part of our body? Our way of life — our comforts, our privileges, our capability to do as we please, when we please, where we please (if we are of the economic elite)?

Fear may be monosyllabic, but it's not simple. Fear is a powerful emotion that drives us to do things that can make us a hero or a villain. Fear can cause us to strike out at even our loved ones, our family. Fear can put us on the defensive so that we are willing to charge into battle, or run away as fast as we can. Fear can lead us into conflicts — sometimes when there is no conflict brewing. When worry overwhelms us, fear is often both the cause and the result.

That's why I see the man who approached Jesus not simply as a greedy person. This isn't unquestionably about how he wants his share of the family inheritance and in asking for it depicts his greediness. Perhaps, he's afraid — afraid of being unable to provide for his wife and kids; afraid that he won't be able to eat or have clothes, or shelter; afraid that he will lose his life — not livelihood, but life. A poor person (in Biblical times as well as today) is more likely to die from poor health or injury than one who has access to good nutrition and healthcare. And, as Jesus points out, life is more than work and wealth; it must include a life oriented toward and reflective of God and God's vision the kin-dom. Not a place in heaven, but a living community of creation that holds God in Christ at the center, trusting and in faith from which God's love, grace, mercy peace, and hope spread.

Our fears paralyze us. We distrust others; especially those who are different from us in skin color, language, dress, culture, and economic status. We let our fears lead us to conflict with others; we grasp at idols to ward off the fear. In reality, the fear remains until we face it, learn from it, and change fear to trust — trust in God first and foremost. Oh, we may never have the trust of Abraham, or Moses, or Mary and Martha, and, especially, not that of Paul. But, that's okay. As John the Elder wrote to the churches under his care, "There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear..."

This is implied in Luke's account of Jesus' teaching about both the parable and the situation prompting it. When we worry to the point of fear, when we obsess about money, food, clothing, shelter without trusting in God and those who make up God's community on earth, then we are not rich toward God — no matter how well off we are. Fear can lead to fights which separate us from each other and from God.

So, let us learn to face our fears in ways that bring us into right relationship with God, with each other, with our possessions, with our world. Let us place our treasure — not solely our financial means — but our greatest treasure, our love, in God where our hearts yearn to reside.

Let us pray: Most gracious and loving God, we have become fearful on so many fronts. Yet, we yearn to cast off our fears. Continue to teach us Your ways through Your Son, our Lord and Savior, Jesus, that will make us truly rich in righteousness, in love and grace, in care and peace and hope. Let us be a blessing to You and for the world. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen