

August 1, 2010

The Tenth Sunday after Pentecost

Colossians 3:1-11; Luke 12:13-21

All Saints' Episcopal Church, Atlanta, Georgia

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Greed and Generosity

I have talked from time to time about the Christian practices of generosity and gratitude, how we cultivate them and how they can be not only manifestations of our freedom in Christ, but can also be ways of our living into the experience of that freedom. Today our lessons point us to think about and avoid *greed* for which generosity is the antonym and our cultivating a spirit of generosity and gratitude is the antidote.

Many of us will have heard of the character Gordon Gecko, even if we never saw the movie *Wall Street* which came out more than 20 years ago and is still aired from time to time. You have heard of Gecko because of his infamous remark "The point is, ladies and gentlemen, that greed, for want of a better word, is good." Greed is good. He also said things like "Lunch is for wimps" and "If you need a friend, get a dog." In answer to the question of how much is enough he said: "It's not a question of enough, pal. It's a zero sum game, somebody wins, somebody loses. Money itself isn't lost or made, it's simply transferred from one perception to another." Gecko is the personification of all that we think of as greed: that desire to have more than we could possibly need or enjoy -- the excessive desire for wealth or possessions.

We've heard a lot about 'greedy bankers and 'populist anger' in recent months, calls for finance reform and blame aplenty for the situation and predicament in which we find ourselves. Books like Michael Lewis' *The Big Short* make clear that there has been, if not actual law breaking, then clear ethical wrongdoing and that there really are some people who ought to be held accountable for their actions in some way. But such books also make clear that the wrongdoing in our financial systems in recent years is not quite such a simple black and white matter in most instances. 'Greed' is not something that afflicts just a few people who have become mega-rich. 'Greed' is rather more complicated and afflicts all of us at one time or another.

'Greed' is a classic example of that truism that we tend to judge ourselves by our intentions and judge others by their actions. We rarely, if ever, accuse ourselves of greed and people that we judge 'greedy' do not think of themselves that way. The people we might think are being greedy do not think so differently than any of us. 'It's not about the money or the accumulation of material wealth. Those are simply the rewards of my meeting this or that challenge.' 'Eating desert for the third time today is not something I want to do regularly but I feel like indulging myself a bit and I can afford it.' 'By insisting on the best, I am creating a truly

beautiful home and I intend to use it to entertain and make it available for charity parties and so on.' 'It is big enough for all the grandchildren to come and stay.' 'I want to be the best at what I do, and that means making money. Money isn't lost or made. It's simply transferred from one perception to another.'" These kinds of thoughts do not have to be mere rationales for greed, Some of them can also be positive moral and spiritual choices, and the reality will only become clear in the whole pattern of our lives.

I confess that I cannot find the citation for this factoid but I have read recently of a study that showed that most people asked 'What is enough?' and answered that about 20% more money would be 'enough'. It is easy to work out that means that even if we were all suddenly given a 20% increase, it would not be long before we wanted more for one reason or another. We don't necessarily need the money, but perhaps we need the recognition for our work.

Can you see how 'greed' is not the straightforward sin it might appear in the mouths of those trying to incite populist anger for political ends? It not listed among the seven deadly sins for nothing. Jesus tells us to "be on our guard against all kinds of greed" and tells the story of a man who thought that if he just had more he would finally be able to relax. St. Paul offers a definition of greed that we don't find in any dictionary. In his list of things that are earthly and need to be put to death when we die with Christ, he includes greed and explains why it is no the list. Greed, he says, is 'idolatry'. Think about that for a minute. Greed is idolatry. Greed, he seems to be saying, is a manifestation of our tendency to put our trust in just about anything other than the source of our life and the ground of our being for happiness. Greed is one manifestation of that instinct that led the people in the wilderness to make a golden calf when things were not working out how they hoped or expected. At one level that story is silly. Who would ever expect a man made golden calf to provide happiness? But isn't that exactly what we do when we are greedy? We expect something external, something 'more' to make life how we want it and to make us feel better about things? Perhaps with just another 20% I could say "Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry."

I began by saying that both antonym of and antidote for greed is generosity. I have shared many times before that my anxieties will often – sooner or later – find their focus in money. 'I can't afford it. I'm hemorrhaging money. Everything is too expensive. I really need more.' These are all the kinds of thoughts that will lead me to be self-indulgent and trigger in me the very essence of greed. The practice of generosity reminds me in a tangible, material way, that not only do I already have enough for what is really important in life. I have: love and relationship, community and hope. Not only do I already have what I need but making a gift is a tangible way of placing my whole trust in God's grace and love, getting centered without necessarily needing to engage some logical thought process, freeing myself to make good decisions and so on .

Greed is what we make manifest when we get anxious about all kinds of things and start looking for a 'fix'. Generosity is the antidote and immunization against all that anxiety controlling and governing our lives. Sometimes we really are over-extended and need to make some material changes. We are told that the result of the recession is that we are spending less and paying off debt wherever we can. These are not bad things but we will make better decisions if we are not being reactive when we make them.

The antidote to greed is the practice of generosity and cultivation of an attitude of gratitude. Thus is why we recommend that the first check you write each month be a gift to someone else.

Let's take a time for prayer as ever, and instead of using it for a kind of neurotic assessment as to whether or not we are greedy, let's use it to inventory all the things we can think of for which we are truly grateful. That in itself is doing the spiritual work we are all given to do.

You have died and your life is hidden with Christ in God, so if you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above...

In silence and in response to the gospel, let us pray.