

“Greed is NOT Good”  
 July 31, 2016  
 Eleventh Sunday After Pentecost  
 Luke 12:13-21

Island Heights UMC, Island Heights, NJ

### Introduction

Barns. Today’s story from the Gospel of Luke features barns. Growing up in rural Sussex County, up in northwest Jersey, I remember several small farms, which typically had barns. The winding roads between our house and our grandparent’s house went past quite a few of these barns, and there was one in particular on Pond Brook Road that fascinated me. It was a big old red barn, which I looked at every time we drove past it, always wondering what was in it.

In today’s story Jesus is speaking to a crowd about a man and his barns; it’s a large crowd; “In the thousands” we read earlier in the chapter—a crowd so big, according to Luke, that people are trampling over one another. And above it all we hear a random voice, someone shouting out to Jesus.

### A Voice in the Crowd

*“Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me.”*

This voice in the crowd fears for his wellbeing, his welfare. He wants what is coming to him, and reasonably expects that Jesus, like other rabbis—like other teachers at the time who are well versed in Mosaic Law—should be able to settle the issue.

*But Jesus says to him, “Friend, who set me to be a judge or arbitrator over you?”* Now, Jesus is willing to engage that voice in the crowd. And while he avoids offering any answers to settle this particular family inheritance issue, he does seize the opportunity to address an important topic that’s going to mean something to that crowd, and remains pertinent to us today as well:

*Jesus says to the crowd, “Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.”*

Greed. It seems to have always plagued humanity, and Jesus has something to say about it. We’re on a challenging subject here.

### The Parable

So Jesus does what he does best to quickly draw us into the reality of the situation. He tells a parable:

*“The land of a rich man produced abundantly. And he thought to himself, ‘What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?’*

*Then he said, ‘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 soul, ‘Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.’*

This is what success looks like. So much increase you don’t even know what to do with it. You’ll never have to work again. But then the nagging thought returns: what if it’s not enough?

### Gordon Gekko Was Wrong

We grab what we can, when we can. We purchase as much as we can afford and beyond. We take what we can get our hands on. What if what we have is not

enough? Got to get more. Store it up. You can never have enough. Our need for security is at the bottom of this. We all need to be sure we will be well taken care of. We are driven to amass and consume as much as we can because at the root is a suspicion that we are on our own; that God is not to be found anywhere, and cannot be trusted to provide for our needs. So we strive, and we gather, and we accumulate. And soon we are infected with greed, getting our hands on the goods before all the others can. We are looking out for number one.

In the 1987 movie *Wall Street* there is a scene in which business superstar Gordon Gekko (played by Michael Douglas) is addressing the shareholders of a struggling company called Teldar Paper to defend himself against suspicions he may be staging a hostile takeover. He has the microphone and the floor is his:

*"I am not a destroyer of companies. I am a liberator of them. The point is, ladies and gentlemen, that greed, for lack of a better word, is good. Greed is right. Greed works. Greed clarifies, cuts through and captures the essence of the evolutionary spirit. Greed in all of its forms, greed for life, for money, for love, knowledge has marked the upward surge of mankind. And greed, you mark my words, will not only save Teldar Paper, but that other malfunctioning corporation called the USA. Thank you very much."* And that's his mic-drop-walk-away moment.

But if I am reading Scripture correctly, if I am understanding Jesus and what he teaches, if I am being sharpened and sanctified by the Holy Spirit in ways that are drawing me closer to God, then all I can say is Gordon Gekko was wrong. Greed is NOT good.

#### The Problem With Greed

How much do we need? When is enough, enough? How much stuff can you fit in that barn anyway? How long before you need to build a bigger barn? And all for what?

There are ethical implications to this. The Epistle reading from Colossians that Bill read earlier encourages us to put off things such as impurity, evil desire, and greed. These mindsets lead to all kinds of problems like anger, malice, slander, abusive language and lying. When we do not trust that God will provide, we return to these old habits of doing whatever is necessary to secure *our* wellbeing, and we destroy our relationships in the process.

John Wesley, founder of Methodism, said, greed is "destructive of that faith which is of the operation of God; of that hope which is full of immortality; destructive of love of God and of our neighbor, and of every good word and work."

Gandhi said, "There is enough in the world for everyone's need; there is not enough for everyone's greed."

Meanwhile, in today's parable God says to the man (note this is the only parable Jesus tells in which God is one of the characters in the story), God says to the self-made, self-satisfied man,

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

There will come that moment when your time is up. On that day your life in this world will be over. And with that will come the realization that all is temporary, and fading away, and ultimately turning to dust. In the end all we really have is our love for

each other and our love for God the Creator into whose presence we will be welcomed. And if we do not invest in *that* we will end with nothing at all, and then we really have nothing to pass on to our children.

*“So it is,”* Jesus says, *“with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God.”*

How much do we really need? Will enough ever be enough? Is God to be trusted?

#### The Good News

But friends, hear the good news. God *does* provide. God *always* take care of God’s children. Earlier we heard the ancient and sacred 107<sup>th</sup> Psalm: *“O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; for his steadfast love endures forever.”* Give thanks! There is a reason this is a good instruction. Because not only does God take care of our physical needs, but because he cares for our very souls, he sends the Gift of his Son Jesus Christ to redeem us, who then promises to send the Holy Spirit to guide us in all our ways.

What happens when we trust God? We now spend our lives cultivating an attitude of gratitude over a self-promoting, self-congratulating ethic of greed. We move from greedily gathering everything into our grip to generously releasing it all to others.

As people who follow Jesus Christ, we are engaged in a battle. Christian ethicist Stanley Hauerwas says, “Charity remains the basis for a Christian ethic of resistance to evil.” The wellbeing of others matters. In the United Methodist Church Book of Resolutions we read,

“We support measures that would reduce the concentration of wealth in the hands of the few. We encourage personal lifestyles that embody good stewardship of wealth on behalf of the poor. We further support efforts to revise tax structures and to eliminate governmental support programs that now benefit the wealthy at the expense of other persons.”

In the struggle there are two different voices. There is a profane voice that speaks of fear and lack of security, but another that thanks God for divine protection and provision.

There is one voice that is prompted by greed and the insatiable desire for more, but another that speaks of charity and giving it all away.

One voice that foolishly sings how much they’ve accomplished all on their own, but another that after years of trouble and toil, testing and trials, joyfully sings to God the words, “Great is thy faithfulness.”

#### Sending Out in Mission

That old red barn up in Sussex County has long since collapsed. The last time I saw it a few years ago it was just a heap of wood resting in a field of weeds that are slowly consuming it into the earth. And so it eventually goes with all that we store up here in this life.

So now listen, the UMC Book of Resolutions also states, “Be it resolved, that the people called United Methodists search the scriptures concerning greed and pray for forgiveness.”

Pray today that where our heart has been misdirected to grab instead of give, that God would forgive.

Pray today that where we have foolishly invested in things of the world instead of the kingdom of heaven, that God would forgive.

Pray today that where we have remained silent in the face of the unjust effects of greed on those among us who are most vulnerable, that God would forgive.

Forward from today let your voice advocate for charity and an ethic of generosity;

Forward from today let your voice speak words that invest in the things of God;

And forward from today let your voice rise from a heart that deeply trusts God and can only sing praises and thanksgiving. Amen.

In the silence of the new few moments, I am going to ask you to plan one thing you will do this week that will be an act of generosity. And then plan one new thing you will do this week to praise and thank God.