

1 Kings 21: 1-16

Seven Deadly Sins: Greed

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The Congregational Church of Needham

I want to start off this morning by sharing with you a news story that comes under the rubric: You can't make this stuff up even if you tried very hard. This is the headline showed up in November of 2013:

"Walmart Holds Food Drive - For Its Own Employees!"

This food drive took place at a Cleveland, OH Wal-Mart Store; a second one at a different store followed suit. An employee of the store came to work one morning, and snapped a picture of the bins placed in the locker room that had the following message taped to them, "Please donate food items so associates in need can enjoy Thanksgiving dinner."

When questioned about the seeming paradox – "Why not pay your employees enough so that they can feed themselves?" - a company spokesman defended the food drive, saying that it is evidence that employees care about each other. Well, isn't that nice!

Of course, we should feel sorry for Walmart (and the Walton family), who turned a profit of only \$ 15.7 billion in 2012. Walmart is America's largest employer with 1.3 million "associates." Paying all these associates a living wages that would actually be fair would cut into the profits of the CEO and the 6 members of the Walton family who by the way are worth \$ 102.7 billion. They have more money combined than the bottom 40 % the American people.

And since Walmart has such dismal profits year after years that it had to turn to the American people in the form of government subsidies like SNAP and food stamps to feed its employees.

So why can't Walmart afford to pay its own store workers enough for them to enjoy a holiday meal with their families? The answer is: **greed**. (www.dailykos.com; Nov. 18, 2013)

Today we are talking about the deadly sin of greed. Miriam Webster defines greed as “a selfish desire to have more of something than what one needs or deserves, especially with respect to material wealth (especially money)”.

This should not come as a surprise that we live in a culture and society that is driven by greed. It sounds terrible but I think it’s true. Greed is so ingrained in our lives, that we consider it normal, and give it a new name: ambition, drive, the will to succeed.

In fact, some have gone so far as to clearly say that greed is good. That’s what actor Michael Douglas says in a speech in the movie *Wall Street*, when he addresses a meeting of the stockholders of Teldar Paper Corporation. This is the speech:

“The point is, ladies and gentleman, 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.”

Maybe it’s just the authoritative sound of Michael Douglas’ voice, but it’s kind of hard to argue with that. And it’s also hard, when it comes down to it, to make a clear distinction between healthy ambition and greed. It’s a hard to be honest with ourselves, when we cross the line to greed.

The drive for more, and better, and bigger is the engine of our economy. Greed is everywhere we look, and we easily accept it. It’s called consumerism. We are pushed to consume. We are inundated with advertisement, telling us what we need in magazines, newspapers, billboards, internet, and television.

The line between what we need and what we want is a very fine one. We need clothing to protect us from the elements, to cover our bodies. But do we need hundreds of hangers in our closets weighed down with the

latest fashion? We need a good pair of shoes to protect our feet when we walk, but do we need 25 pairs that match each outfit? At what point is enough enough? At what point does covering our basic needs become an insatiable desire for more, bigger, better, faster? I need you to understand that I am not standing on any higher moral ground. I am seduced by my wants just like any other person.

King Ahab in our story took his personal greed to another level. He thought that because he was the king - the person with the power - he could have everything if he wanted it. He wanted Naboth's vineyard for a vegetable garden in exchange for another piece of land. Why not take such a generous offer? Well, because there is more to owning a piece of land for an Israelite.

Land was not only a source of financial security but also a connection to family. It was so important for land to remain with the family to whom God had given it that God established the jubilee year. Every fifty years, land that had somehow passed from a family's hands was restored to that family.

Although we are not certain that the Israelites ever put the jubilee year into practice, its purpose is clear: land and the gifts of God are inviolate even if it is the king who wants the land.

That is why Naboth invoked God's name in his response to Ahab: "The LORD forbid that I should give you my ancestral inheritance" (1 Kings 21:3). Naboth regarded the land as a gift from God. Family honor and devotion to God led him to refuse a better vineyard or a large price.

And honestly, a real king needing another vegetable garden? That's like pastors needing another book. Real kings have real power: they can do what they want and get what they want. Real greed always as to do with power, because power opens the path to all kinds of choices, most of them not good.

When Naboth says no and Ahab sulks around the palace like a sad puppy, Jezebel taunts, *"Is this how you act as king of Israel? I'll get you the vineyard."* One wonders if Ahab is that much of a wimpy whiner, or if he deceptively masterminds a passive manipulation scheme to get Jezebel to do what he wants.

Either way Ahab and Jezebel conceive a murder plot that both disregards Israelite laws and uses them for their own greedy purpose. Naboth is stoned to death and dogs lick up his blood. Ahab gets to grow his tomatoes. It seems that greed wins.

Greed, just like all the other deadly sins, wears many faces. Greed is exemplified in people who make it their life's goal to amass as much money and possession they can. But it has a strong hold on people who try to do everything they can to get out of work while their colleagues work at a frantic pace but are first in line to reap the rewards of the effort made (by someone else). Greedy people look for clever ways or loopholes to outsmart rules and regulations, designed to protect the system, for personal gains. Greedy people only think about themselves. Greedy people have strong opinions about issues but expect others to shoulder the burdens. Greedy people are first in line to ask for more but last in line to put in the work required to earn the rewards. Greedy people will tear other people down rather than build them up. Greedy people have the ability to suck the oxygen right out of the room. Greedy people care about their needs today and kick problems down the road for others to cope with in the future.

We live in such a competitive society. We measure success by finishing in first place, making it to the top of our game, and having better toys than our neighbors. We value instant gratification by encouraging people to consume rather than to save for a rainy day — people borrow money to prove that they live large. We admire people who drive expensive cars, wear the latest fashions, and live in luxurious homes. Greedy or not, we all help perpetuate this deadly sin.

How do we get out of this vicious cycle of greed? What would it take for us to not let greed run our lives and let it win?

We could give away our possession. Or, at least rid ourselves of all the excess. It's a good start. And honestly, it is a bit too simplistic.

Or maybe we could figure out what indeed possesses us that keeps us from living the life we are meant to live, and figure out how to make the necessary changes. That would take some doing but could be a path to a less greedy life.

Or we could practice the art of saying, “No, thank you.” I am not only talking about turning down that second piece of chocolate cake – that’s getting into the sermon on gluttony.

Will Willimon writes in his book *Sinning like a Christian* that what we need is the strength of character, to be able to look at the world and all it has to offer, and at certain key moments simply say, “No, thank you. I am satisfied.”

He said that because of the way our culture forms us today, it takes huge moral stamina to say, “Yes we could afford it, but we are not going to buy it, because it does little to contribute to the basic goodness of our lives.”

Or we could practice, if we are willing, the opposite of greed: generosity (which is one of the antonyms for greed; other are abstemious, benevolent, charitable, extravagant, liberal).

Many a time, the act of generosity, even if we do it with some reluctance, can help cultivate the spirit of generosity, and help drive away the sin of greed. In giving we may discover the freedom that comes, from the simple act of opening our hands, of letting go.

Will Willimon suggests that if we want to work against greed, we need to practice—there’s that word again—“practice open-handed, gratuitous giving, practice in the art of letting go.”

What we have is not ours, anyway. I trust you know that. At least, that’s what the whole Jewish and Christian tradition teaches us. The psalmist proclaims God as the owner of all things in creation, including the “cattle on a thousand hills.” King David, after the people of Israel gave their possessions to build a place of worship, said to God, “Who am I, and who are my people, that we should be able to give as generously as this? Everything comes from you, and we have given you only what comes from your hand.”

To look at anything that came from God’s hand, and call it “mine,” amounts to profanity. It’s taking what is holy, and making it profane. Let’s add the word “mine” to the list of 4-letter words that we ought not to say.

And instead, practice the art of saying, “Thank you.” Thank you, God, for the privilege of caring for these things that belong only to you. Thank you, God. Thank you.

Meister Eckhart once said: "If the only prayer you say in your whole life is, 'Thank You', that would suffice." And like generosity, practicing gratitude helps to cultivate a spirit of gratitude, and drives away the sin of greed.

Let's practice gratitude together, as we sing with thankful hearts to God. Open your bulletin to the insert, where there is a song, from the Taizé community, called, "In the Lord, I'll be ever thankful." Let us sing, and let us listen to what God might be saying to us. And as you sing, please come forward to drop your pebble into the vessel.

You are invited to come forward, open your hand and let go. Amen.