

Sermon on Luke 12:13-21
8th Sunday after Pentecost, August 4, 2019
Lutheran Church of the Redeemer
By James Erlandson

How many of you are old enough to remember the movie *Wall Street* (from 1987) and the slimy character Gordon Gekko, played by Michael Douglas? Do you remember the famous line he said from that movie? "*Greed is good.*" He played the part of a corporate raider, who made his money buying companies that were under-performing, breaking them up, and selling their parts for a big profit. Here is the speech from which those famous words come, which Gecko delivered at the annual shareholders' meeting of a company he intended to control, and sell:

"The new law of evolution in corporate America seems to be the survival of the unfittest. Well, in my book you either do it right or you get eliminated. In the last seven deals that I've been involved with, there were 2.5 million stockholders who have made a pretax profit of 12 billion dollars. Thank you. 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 this company, but that other malfunctioning corporation called the USA. Thank you very much". To Gekko, greed was the inspiration behind making money with the by-product of cutting out worthless, wasted business practices.

Now, lest you fear that your pastor has sold his soul to the dark side, these are not my words, but Gordon Gekko's (the movie character). I am opposed to the values he spoke of with all of my heart, soul, mind and strength! But I propose that this speech from the movie is at its heart a modern parallel to Jesus' parable told in today's gospel about "*The Rich Fool*". In the end, Gordon Gecko proved himself to be a fool, and received his comeuppance. He was brought down by a young stockbroker played by Tom Cruise, who used the same tools of insider trading that Gecko had taught him. Greed was not so good in the end! Greed was bad, and took all that he had, but his life!

So the gospel began with Jesus teaching the crowd, and someone called out for Jesus to "tell my brother to share his inheritance with me!" Jesus answered that he was not a corporate lawyer or a judge, to arbitrate such grievances. His answer was this: "*Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for your life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.*" Jesus used the "g" word: GREED, for the underlying problem behind human jealousy, and he called it "sin". Jesus also told this parable about a rich farmer, whose land produced abundantly, so much

that he wondered what to do with all his excess produce. Of course, it didn't occur to this man to share it with the poor, or to invest it in a way that would benefit others in the community. His only thought was what he should do with "his" additional wealth. The solution? Build bigger barns. Then he could be comfortable and secure, so that for years to come he could eat, drink and be merry. It sounds like this man was "living the life", doing what every human being alive could ever hope for! He was successful, his efforts were "blessed by God" we might say, and he saved for his future – he would never be a drain on society, for he was a "self made man"!

But, no - Jesus said that God would call this man "A FOOL! This very night your life is being demanded of you! And the things you have prepared, whose will they be? So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God."

Let us be clear. The rich man is not a fool just because he is wealthy. He is not a fool because he worked hard and saved for his future. He is a fool because he lives only for himself, and believes that he can secure his future life with his abundant possessions. This condition is a common foolishness among us human beings. Even when we are not rich, we can become foolish by seeking wealth or more possessions to make us more secure in our present living or our future life – when we know that no amount of wealth can save us from an accident, disease, or old age. Calamity can strike at any moment. No matter how much you have in your 401k account or in your possessions, even with your mortgage paid off and healthy eating and exercise.

But even more foolish, according to Jesus, is how the rich man never called upon God for guidance in what he should do with his wealth and possessions. He only talked to himself! He asked himself, "Self, what should I do? Oh, I know, 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!" Tear down your modest, split-level home and build a McMansion! Get rid of your economic, compact vehicle and buy a luxury car with all the creature comforts! Drain that swamp, and fill it again for yourself! This seems to be the American dream, right?

Except here we have words from Ecclesiastes, our first lesson, which counters such foolishness. *"I hated all my toil in which I had toiled under the sun, seeing that I must leave it to those who come after me – and who knows whether they will be wise or foolish? So I turned my heart to despair...for all is vanity."* The conclusion is that "you can't take it with you" – so what is the point to all the toil and hoarding of possessions? The author concludes that *"there is nothing better for mortals than to eat and drink, and find enjoyment in their toil. This also, I saw, is from the hand of God; for apart from God who can eat or who can have enjoyment? For to the one who pleases him God gives wisdom and knowledge and*

joy...” In the next chapter of Ecclesiastes we read that: for everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven: a time to be born and a time to die; and so on. “But whatever God does endures forever.”

In the end, we must all admit that all material possessions and wealth can give us is emptiness and vanity. There is a purpose to money as a means to an end – for we use money as a means of exchange, for food, clothing, shelter and health. But wealth and possessions in themselves have no value – as you cannot eat silver or gold when you are starving! You and I know, or if not, we will one day find out, that wealth and possessions can never secure our lives, or our health and safety. Even more important, no amount of wealth can secure our lives with God. So Jesus teaches us to be rich toward God, not in storing up possessions.

All this is not intended to add to our guilt, for who among us is free from seeking security in life, for working for possessions that help make our lives easier? Any of you who have ever been unemployed or without housing, who has ever been a refugee or immigrant, or lived through the Great Depression, or a crisis caused by devastating illness, you know how important it is to earn money and save it for you and your family’s survival. This is not what Jesus is talking about!

Jesus speaks today of not being foolish because of selfishness, when you or I are fortunate enough to have more than we need to live. Don’t just hold onto it for yourself! Whatever you have, life, health, even wealth, is a gift from God, and not your own. Share it with your neighbor in need, so that everyone can live the abundant life God promises for all creation. Don’t follow the urge for GREED, our natural tendency to be selfish, because this is harmful to our neighbors around the world. Instead, follow Jesus’s teaching: the God-given virtue of GENEROSITY, charity, which exemplifies LOVE for neighbor, which is the greatest commandment of all!

In the end, I don’t think the most powerful sin is that of greed, selfishness, or avarice. These are powerful motivators, to be sure, but the greatest of all motivations may be that of FEAR. It can often be that fear of the future can move us to hold on to our possessions, to ensure our survival, even if it is irrational. Fear motivates us to lash out at people we don’t understand, to close our borders to immigrants or refuse asylum to refugees – if we have heard from leaders that they are people to be feared. When in reality, immigrants build our future with their blood and sweat. Fear of the future causes churches to close, as they shut down ministries we fear we cannot afford, or only support ministries that serve US, that we value and understand. Fear causes people to vote for leaders who don’t have their safety or interests in mind, only their own. Fear causes people to lash out, like the shooter who traveled all the way from Dallas to El Paso to shoot innocent people in a shopping mall because of hate. Fear spreads when automatic weapons

are used in attacks on schools, shopping malls and other public spaces, and even churches, temples, mosques and synagogues are not safe.

In response to all our fears, Jesus says “Come to me, you who are burdened and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest.” Put aside your fear, and hope in him! Next Sunday we will read further in Luke’s gospel, when people came to Jesus with all their fears and anxieties about their lives, Jesus said: *“Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the Kingdom.”*

Jesus also said that the Kingdom of God is within you. It is in your heart. The promise of life has already been given. We have the gift, even as we know the future – we are promised abundant life, as at the same time we know that we shall die. But even when we die, we have this promise: you and I shall rise again. We shall be raised to life forever with God. This is our true inheritance! So have no fear, even of death. Store up treasures of faith in God, not in wealth on earth, because you have this promise forever! Have no fear, embrace life, with faith in God and generosity for others.

Thanks be to God! Amen.

We pray for the 20 killed and 26 wounded shot yesterday in El Paso, Texas by a lone male shooter, and for the 9 dead and 16 wounded by a shooter in Dayton, Ohio early this morning

A prayer from Martin R. Ericson, pastor of Como Park Lutheran Church, St. Paul:

God of all mercies,

We grieve and long for your Spirit’s presence.

We confess that we do not care well enough for those who are angry, disturbed or in pain.

Bring an end to our racism and our hatred and our fear, we pray.

Teach us to put away guns and turn away from violence.

Bring healing to this nation,

And comfort the victims of this week’s murders in Dayton, Ohio; El Paso, Texas, and Gilroy, California.

Comfort all who are filled with sorrow at this world’s violent deaths.

Lord in your mercy. Hear our Prayer.