

## **“The Seven Deadly Sins Today: Greed”**

**John 12: 1-8; Acts 5: 1-6**

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### **Fourth Sunday in Lent**

*Regarding greed, as we become preoccupied with evaluating all things, ourselves included, in terms of monetary worth, we lose the ability to see things for what they really are.*

– Solomon Schimmel

On our Lenten journey through the Seven Deadly Sins, We are on sin Number 6: Greed. In some ways, greed is the most difficult to address because it is so pervasive and takes so many forms:

Personal greed which can lead to stealing, corruption, lying, betrayal, even murder.

Corporate greed, which can lead to injustice, oppression, corruption, betrayal of private and public trust, environmental greed where we use up the natural resources and ignore future generations. Greed also has a number of important corollary topics such as obsessive materialism, and excessive work.

If we start with the Bible, one passage in particular is the most misquoted we often hear: “Money is the root of all evil.” That is not what the Bible says. 1 Timothy 6 says, “The Love of money of the root of all evil. First, it implies that desiring wealth above all other things, including God, is corrosive to the human spirit and social relations. Money is not bad: the problem is an inordinate desiring of money. Focusing on it above all else. It distorts our vision: we lose the ability to see reality.

Second, when the Bible says, “The love of money is the root of all evil,” it is not that money necessarily makes people evil. Rather that just about any kind of evil you can think of, may spring out of an inordinate desire for wealth. Money is not evil; it is a temptation.

Part of the temptation is to think that money has magical powers. If we just had enough money all our problems would be solved. But as we all know, no matter how much someone earns, they always think if they just had 20% or 40% or 50% more, life would finally be good.

There is a quirky scene in the Monty Python movie, *The Meaning of Life*. After a song about the ever expanding universe, the camera shifts to the Chairman of the board addressing his board members gathered around a large table, as he says: “This brings us once again to the urgent realization of just how much there is still left to own.” A winsome image of how we keep wanting more. Somehow it never seems to be enough.

There was an interview on NPR this week about economics. The speaker was making the case that we have come to view as sacred the idea that if corporations just sell more, it will automatically

translate into a better world for all. Ignoring the fact that many of the things we build have hidden negative consequences. Increasing the common good takes more than greed.

Dante has an image of the greedy in the Inferno. They sit on the edge of a sandy desert. Their heads are bowed weighed by a thick rope at the end of which is a giant wallet with their wealth. They can't take their eyes off of it. So when the flames of the inferno lick out toward them, they can't get out of the way because they can't they can't see it coming.

You see, when they were alive, their obsession on gaining more wealth kept them so focused on money that did not see the pain that their greed inflicted on others. Now it is their turn to be blindsided by the flames that shoot out in their direction. And all their money does not do them a bit of good in the inferno. Greed. It's quite deadly.

There is another, even more ancient story that the Greeks told: the myth of King Midas. You know the core story: Midas was a King infatuated with his gold. He spent as much time as he could in his underground vaults, counting his gold. But there was never enough. He wished he could just touch things and turn them into gold.

One day a mysterious stranger grants him his wish. At first, Midas is delighted: Everything he touched turned to gold. He touches a flower: it turns to gold. He touches a chair, it turns to gold. But then he tries to eat his food: It turns to gold and he can't eat! Then his little girl, Marigold, runs to jump in his arms. He realizes his folly as his beloved turns into gold. It is an image of how Greed can dehumanize us. For the Greeks, the moral of the Midas story is, beware of trying to get rich without the wisdom to go with it.

Wealth is not bad, it can be very good, but, there are consequences to having wealth. Learn what having wealth requires. Having wealth requires the wisdom to use its power. An obsessive focus on wealth blinds us to what happens to other people due to our greed.

If the practice of greed is the vice, the hope that we have is twofold: practicing wisdom and generosity.

There is no shortcut to wisdom. There is not magical incantation you mumble to gain it. You only gain wisdom by a lifetime of seeking it. In particular, it comes through learning from other people. We are all tempted to try to save ourselves through obsessive materialism. To gain the wisdom to overcome it, we have to join with other people, and talk about important things. To ask hard questions, to listen to different ideas. To gain the wisdom of when to say yes and when to say no. To talk about important things. Money is important. How we use our wealth is important.

Princeton Sociologist Robert Wuthnow writes that Christians need to have a basic understanding of how economic systems work in order for people of faith to have the impact to which God calls us. I think that is true.

Last week I said we ought to talk about sexuality. This week, I'm saying it's even more important, to talk about money. How do our Christian values influence what we prioritize in our lives? What we own? What we faithfully are willing to sacrifice? How we invest our money?

At the First Presbytery meeting I ever attended, an elder, a layman from some church was giving a speech on stewardship. I remember clearly what he said: "I'm a plumber. I tithed." Those two sentences, spoken by a person of faith talking openly about money, changed my life. From his faithful generosity, I learned that ordinary people can do extraordinary things.

Our faith does not call us to reject the world or money. Faith calls us to recognize its potentials: potential for evil and potential for great good. Money has a spiritual power. It needs to be handled wisely. Discerningly.

The gospel story this morning about a woman who pours out perfume on Jesus' feet: it is a year's salary worth of perfume. Think of her as a street artist: with this artistic act she symbolizes Jesus' freedom to love, and the way Jesus sets us free to do the same!

That same sort of radical generosity is taken even further in the Book of Acts. If you read that book of the Bible you see a community inspired by Jesus' love. They start practicing his values, including this radical generosity to the point where they give everything they earn to a common pot. Then they distribute it: so if anyone has any needs, they are taken care of.

It is a community where no one is homeless, no one is hungry, no one lives in poverty. They share so powerfully. It is a life-giving, vitalizing experience to live among these people. This is a community that is life-giving! The spirit of Jesus is there among them. They are alive! But it is a vulnerable ideal.

There are two people: husband and wife. Ananias and Sapphira. They act as if they had the same passion as everyone else. They tell people they have the passion. But then their true character comes through. They sell some property.

They are not required to give a thing. Let me repeat that: it is crucial to understand the story. They are not required to give a dime. But they say they will give the whole amount. They brag that they are going to embody what is profound to the church. But then they don't.

What happens next? They fall over dead. Why? Does God kill them? The text never says that. It is a community of radical, free generosity. Ananias and Sapphira practice a hidden, hypocritical, greed. The truth of that matter is, they themselves cut themselves off from the life-giving connection to the community. Greed leads to lying; lack of integrity; lack of passion; lack of connection to God, community, neighbor. They did not feel the life-giving passion because they did not practice it.

I think: I think the heart of love just stopped beating in them. I think they just dropped out, and went shopping for another church that did not expect so much out of them. Their own greed cuts them off from the spirit of the community. It cuts the connection.

Christian faith is about a vitality that comes from experiencing that you are part of the body of Christ. Vitality comes from doing your part to contribute to the flow of a life-giving community. A community that is powerful in what it can give, so beautiful in what it can share, so amazing in the spirit that animates it.

Notice: it is not out of guilt that people are motivated. It is because the radical sharing is the ventricle of the heart of this spiritual body, called church. People give because they passionately want to feel the flow of the life-giving, life-sharing love.

Practicing generosity is part of how we feel the power of giving ourselves to God and giving ourselves to one another. When you do, all of a sudden, a burden is lifted. Your joy is increased. The world becomes larger, more joyful, more interesting.

I have been blessed to have spent significant time as pastor at 7 different congregations. At so many churches, I have seen so much generosity shared, so much joy generated.

Sally is a mother-type of person who never had her own children. So she opened up herself to treat all sorts of people as if they were her own brood. One year, she said, "Anyone who wants TG dinner, come to the church. I'll do the fixing, I'll do the buying, I'll do the dishes." 70 people showed up and had a wonderful time. The next year, 120 people showed up. It is amazing what one generous woman and one church kitchen can do.

Bob is a farmer. He works hard. He loves his church and he loved his parents. And when they died, Bob endowed his church in their memory. This little church in a small town on the prairie is still alive because Bob had a generous spirit.

The Presbyterian Church is a mission church. Among the many colleges they started is Blackburn College. It is financially structured so the students do all the work around the college. It is incredibly cheap to go to Blackburn. So when I had a young man with no parents who wanted to go to college, the Presbyterians had made a college that fit him perfectly. Generosity changes lives.

House of Hope is an amazing congregation. You give so the lives of thousands of people are touched by the multidimensional love of Jesus Christ. You love one another. You love the children of this church. You share Christ's love with the community. Every year, you give over a quarter of a million dollars to mission. It happens because every year you practice generosity.

There are more new pledges this year; it shows that your generosity is growing. I hope it grows more, because that means we can share more faith, hope and love.

Faith is more important than fantasies of how money will save us. Money is a means of moral good. There are many people who have told this church that they have put the HOH Endowment into their will or estate plans. I want to recognize how profoundly wise and generous this is. I want to invite you who have not yet put the church in your will to double that number. Why?

If you love something, institutionalize it. Make it thrive after you are alive. Smile: because you know the good that is coming. If the wrong type of love of money is the root of all sorts of evil, the right type of generosity is the root of all kinds of good.

Generous people pay attention to money without becoming preoccupied. They are wise enough to know that it is to be used to create something beautiful, important. Generous people seem to laugh more freely, live with more joy. Giving is about living. As we give, we live.

Giving people are hopeful people: they invest in life. They experience God's generous spirit flowing through their attitudes and actions. It opens their eyes: they see how many other generous people are out there also. It keeps them from obsessively focusing on wallets, or their vaults of gold. It connects you with God and with other people.

Do you know the story about the 3 men stranded on a desert island? The first one lit a big fire to attract any rescuers. But the fire burned out, and he was dejected. The second one flew a big, bright cloth from the top of a palm tree. But the wind blew the cloth away, and he was dejected.

The third one did nothing, he just sat there with a big smile on his face. The others asked him why are you just sitting there smiling?

He said, "Two years ago, I gave my church one million dollars. Last year, I gave my church two million. This year, I pledged three million dollars. I just know, the stewardship committee will come find me."

Generous people are connected to one another. It makes us free to live, free to laugh, free to love. Be free. Practice generosity. Giving is living.

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