

*Rich Toward God*  
Colossians 3:12-17 ~ Luke 12:13-21  
Going with God: Part 3 of 3 ~ June 24, 2018  
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***Introduction to Gospel Reading:***

Two weeks ago it was two sisters, Martha and Mary, who weren't getting along—Martha was getting madder and madder at Mary for sitting at Jesus feet and not helping her sister get the meal ready for Jesus and his twelve disciples. Martha was so sure she was right she demanded of Jesus to correct Mary, "Tell her then to help me." (Luke 10:40b).

This morning we will hear a story about two brothers (we aren't told their names) who are not getting along. But this time it wasn't about household duties—it was about the fair distribution of inheritance money. And the younger one was afraid his older brother was going to cheat him out of his share. He was so sure he was right (kind of like Martha) he spoke up in the middle of a huge crowd, appealing to Jesus to arbitrate. This brother, following the tradition of asking Rabbis to settle disputes of this kind, shouted out to Jesus from the crowd, "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me." (Luke 12:13)

Do you think that's what Jesus did? You may recall that Jesus did not follow Martha's bidding to tell Mary to get up and go help her sister in the kitchen. And you are right if you are thinking that Jesus probably surprised the younger brother with what he said to him, too. You are about to see Jesus turn the younger brother's demand into an opportunity to teach him and to teach us, about greed. "All kinds of greed." He could see beneath the surface question, to the greed that was driving this young man's outburst.

Keep in mind the larger context of this story—Jesus is still "on his way" to Jerusalem when this story, found only in Luke, occurs. So little time on earth left—so much for his disciples still to learn. Let's listen up for Jesus' lesson about "all kinds of greed," told through parable. Let's imagine ourselves to be among the crowd, "gathered by the thousands" but somehow we are up toward the front, within earshot of this younger brother and Jesus as I begin at verse 13 of chapter 12 in the Gospel According to Luke

***Sermon***

Shall we do some comparison shopping? Say the cost of greed vs. the cost of discipleship. Greed digs a deep hole into our pocket books. Greed grabs our hearts and takes and takes and won't let go: it's the nagging voice whispering in our ear, "You need more. You have nothing to wear!" Have you ever looked in your closet and said that either out loud or to yourself? I'm willing to bet there are plenty of clothes hanging in your closet that are clean, in good repair, fit you and will protect you against the weather. And yet, what we see is nothing to wear so, an invitation to shop.

Have you ever opened your refrigerator and said to yourself (or heard another member of your family) complain, “There’s nothing to eat!” When actually there is food in your kitchen, plenty to fill an empty stomach with good nutrition that is neither moldy nor unsafe to eat. Maybe it’s not what you’re in the mood to eat. Or maybe it’s left over from what you ate yesterday. But there is something to eat. Plenty, actually.

The next time we think we have nothing to wear or nothing to eat—let’s do a reality check-in to see our perceived need on the global scale of all God’s children:

- Currently 82 million Nigerians live on under \$1.90 cents a day, overtaking India in February of 2018 with the most people in extreme poverty in their country in the world.
- This year, in 2018, 70 million people in 45 countries required emergency food assistance, up 40 per cent from 2015. The Rohingya people of Myanmar face serious starvation and violations of their right to food.
- Roughly half of all Yemeni children under the age of 5 are stunted, which means their mental and physical potential will never be realized. Terrorist groups recruit children in Yemeni with food.
- And, of course, after the turmoil this past week right here in our own country at our southern border, refugees from Central America, are on our minds and tug at our hearts: families who are living in El Salvador, Honduras, Guatemala, Mexico fleeing their countries because of violence that is driven by poverty.

In the news on June 22, I read this: “Poverty is hammering away at livelihoods in much of Central America and for some, the decision to leave is a gamble on a better life. A father and son at the at the border, Mr. Cruz and his son Luis, fled because his 16 year old son was approached twice by a gang who demanded he join them, flashing a gun and urging him to commit his first extortion. “They kill you if you don’t obey,” said Mr. Cruz. On June 3 they left for the US and presented themselves at the border to ask for asylum. After lunch at the shelter, the younger Mr. Cruz pulled a piece of paper, a note from his school director, “The student had to withdraw himself from school due to violence and gang persecution,” she wrote. “He decided to move to save his life.”<sup>i</sup>

In the Good News of Jesus Christ, we read this: “**Take care. Be on your guard against all kinds of greed, for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.**” What is the connection between Jesus’ words that day on his way to Jerusalem and our global crisis of now over 65 million displaced people in the world today? 65 million people who did not even have a closet or a refrigerator to choose what they would wear or what they would eat for breakfast this morning. Of course the reasons behind this crisis are multiple and complex.

However I believe that underneath the surface a major driver is greed. All kinds of greed: with greed for possessions and for power at the top of this list.

What is need—and what is greed? I hear Jesus calling us out in this passage today—not only as individuals but as a nation whose idea of “need” seems to continue to spiral away from Jesus’ clear gospel mandate to a life that shuns greed. Did you know that the square feet of a “middle class” home in the 1950’s and 60’s has grown by leaps and bounds so that now those same homes are considered “lower class” living at best? The average size of American homes *has actually tripled* since 1950 – from 983 square feet to 2,657 square feet. We seem to also keep needing more clothes: most of us have 4 and 5 times more clothes than we thought we needed even 20 years ago. Clothes that required gallons and gallons of fossil fuels to produce, ship, deliver. Our increased consumption of clothes is just one of the multiple ways our greed contributes to and dependency on fossil fuels that is accelerating planet-threatening climate change.

As Christ calls us to be on guard against all kinds of greed, I think we need to hear the connection between the greed of our culture and our daily life decisions. And then we need to work together to figure out ways to push back against it. A metaphor I find helpful (and ever present here in June in Marshfield, thanks to our abundant rain and sun) is this: *Greed is like a weed* that grows in the cracks of our sidewalks, and driveways, and courtyards and hosta gardens. Especially the pesky ones that seem to sprout over night, and then when you try to pull them, they break off just before you get them by the root.

Like weeds, the messages encouraging our greed sprout up everywhere we turn around. “The good life” defined by an abundance of possession shouts at us every hour of every day on our TV’s and all our other screens, large and small. Even if you weren’t shopping on Amazon, have you ever found yourself buying something inadvertently? Even at gas stations now a screen seems to activate when you start pumping gas pedaling what you could buy if you went inside to their store. The altars of American consumption are everywhere.

If you were only reading these signs of our times you would get the clear message that for us, life, the “good life” definitely *does* consist in the abundance of possessions. We are all about acquiring, storing, maintaining our stuff, our properties, our investments. That’s what we learn “being rich” means according to our culture. It’s in the air we breathe, the water we drink. It’s that little voice we hear all around and inside of us: saying, “your possessions will make you happy, they will make you proud, they will make you look good. Your possessions are your golden key.”

But Jesus says to us today, the exact opposite: “Life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.” To illustrate the point, he made up the story, the parable about the “Rich Fool” who hoards his abundance, and kicks back to enjoy it, “Boy do I have it made.” Why is Jesus picking on him? He earned that wealth fair and square.

Wasn't he just securing his good fortune? And yet, like the priest and Levite who were the bad, anti-neighbors in the parable of The Good Samaritan, and like Martha who was the distracted bad disciple compared to the focused, listening Mary; and like the anti-parent who would give his child a stone or scorpion when he asked for bread in the parable about prayer. Jesus sets up the Rich Fool as an example of a bad anti-disciple. The Rich Fool is *not* "Going with God" but going against God and not even realizing it.

How many ways does Christ have to tell us: We are not here to build bigger barns. Not if we are going to follow the one who said "Deny yourself, take up your cross and follow me." That is how we become rich toward God; that is Christ's invitation to get "Going with God." Getting more, spending more, having more and more stuff will distract and even derail the divine path God would have us take. This week, as you make decisions about what you will buy, how you will spend your time and attention, ask yourself: will this purchase, this errand, this meeting, this activity enrich my life toward God? Or not? Listen to your self-talk. "Am I growing in gratitude or am I griping about what I lack? Am I finding ways to give of my riches or have I been spending more energy figuring out how to increase them, maintain them, store them? Listen to the answers God will give you.

Think right now for a moment: To whom *are we* giving stones and scorpions who are asking for, pleading for bread or a school to go to where instead of learning algebra, you learn you have to choose between joining a gang or being killed. How are we being rich fools? It is not a storing problem. It's a sharing problem. Greed is not new or unique to our time and culture. It is an almost constant theme in Jesus' teachings in the Gospel of Luke. This sermon may be a hard one to hear. It is a hard one to preach. Yet on this third Sunday of our three sermon series on "Going with God" we have moved from Listening like Mary, Praying as Jesus taught us, and now putting it into action by being "Rich toward God."

And this is Good News. I am here to share the Good News of Jesus Christ and will my sermon on this Good News: **It only takes one.** It only takes one person, going with God, to literally save lives and I think the world. Let me explain. I heard about this in a new way yesterday morning here. We had two officers here from the Marshfield Police Department leading about 30 of us in a two-hour session of "Active Shooter Training" or as we learned yesterday more accurately, "Active Attacker Training" in order to prepare ourselves here at FPC in the event of an "Active Attacker" event happening here. Since the year 2000, we learned, that the rate of these attacks across the country has increased steadily to where it is now one every two weeks. That's the bad news. I'm getting to the Good News, as promised.

The Good News is the power of One. Fueled by the power of our Savior whom God raised from the dead, by "Going with God" we are going with the One who is more powerful than death and destruction, no matter the rate or the level of violence. And the Risen Christ calls us to act decisively for the good. Here's what I heard in a new way at the training yesterday. Particularly in stressful crowd

situations, if just one person does something, others will jump in and follow. One person can literally save lives in an active shooter situation. The Power of One applies to individual lives—the power of one good decision at a time. And it applies on a cosmic scale indirectly.

Jesus did not get crucified in Jerusalem for his parables about love, his healings or his miracles. The crowds were not incited to yell “Crucify Him” because he fed 5000 people with five loaves and two fish. The Power of One threatened the powers that be. They could see that Jesus’ way called for systemic change and they were afraid. Even underneath that miraculous event is the good news message I hope you will carry home today. Remember how even after multiplying the loaves and fish there were twelve baskets of left overs? **In God’s realm, when we go God’s way: there is always more, not less.** It is counterintuitive, countercultural, but gospel strength true: Sharing from what we have feeds the world that Jesus died to save. We have more than we need for everyone on this earth. What is holding us back?

A final visual point of hope and good news. Please raise your hand if you know where there is a door to exit this sanctuary other than the ones you enter from? Those of you who are raising your hand, please point to it and everyone look around and notice it. I was challenged yesterday morning to work this door into my sermon, for safety training. My first response was: we were not trained in seminary to preach sermons that tell people to take the exits. But I thought about it some more, and here is what I came up with: The exit door from the ways we are living that go against God, is always there, ready for us to use. The door to the abundance of God’s love and mercy is within reach. Even when we forget where the door is. When we choose to be rich toward God: There is always more. And yes, Being rich toward God is always within our reach.

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<sup>i</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/06/22/us/immigration-border-children.html>