

# Sermon

July 31, 2016 | The 11th Sunday after Pentecost  
Text: Luke 12:13-21 | Preacher: Dan Puchalla

*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, for 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.*

The speaker of these words was not Mr. Trump, but the notorious fictional character Gordon Gekko, that slick-haired, slick-tongued corporate raider portrayed by Michael Douglas in the 1987 film *Wall Street*. These words come from a speech Gekko makes at a shareholders' meeting of a company called Teldar Paper, which he is trying to take over. This speech, this character, this movie, and the excesses they all represent are summed up in that one sentence, "Greed is good" – which, incidentally, is also a direct refutation of Jesus' words in today's gospel.

And yet, is Gekko's speech so villainous? Greed is good, Gekko argues, because greed in all its forms has improved the condition of humanity – greed for life, greed for love, greed for knowledge, and, yes, greed for money. The drive to know more, to invent better things, to find cures for diseases, to live a better life is what lifts up the condition of everyone. Gekko paints a picture of the great American spirit, industrialists and entrepreneurs lifting the fortunes and quality of life of the whole country through their pursuit of profit. He makes greed sound pretty good indeed.

But let's imagine Jesus sitting in that stockholder's meeting, sitting and listening to Gordon Gekko talk about how greed is so good, and how greed will save this country. I imagine Jesus standing up when Mr. Gekko is through talking about greed, taking the microphone, and, quoting from another 80s movie, saying to him, "You keep using that word. I don't think it means what you think it means. Let me tell you what greed really means. Let me tell you a story. There was once a man who grew lots and lots of food, and he built giant warehouses to store it all in so that he would have more than enough for the rest of his life. And he said to himself, 'Time to kick up my feet, drink a julep, and check out from the world.' But that very night, he

dropped dead, and the last thing he heard was a voice from beyond saying to him, "Whose wealth is it now?" That, Mr. Gekko, is what greed is."

I think Jesus would say to him, "Greed is bad. Greed is wrong. Greed does not work. Greed confuses, bogs down, and captures the essence of all evil because greed is not about the drive to greater knowledge, greater love, greater life, or even greater wealth – what greed is really about is that foolish man sitting alone talking to himself, storing up his treasures for no purpose other than his own security and comfort."

That is what this parable Jesus tells is about and what he is cautioning us against. Beware of greed in all its forms because in all of its forms what greed boils down to is isolation. Greed is about cutting myself off from the rest of humanity by looking after only myself. Greed is the loneliest of sins.

As it turns out in the film, such greed is precisely what Gordon Gekko lived out by his actions despite what he professed by his mouth. His greed hardly marked an upward surge for humanity but rather led to his own downfall and ruination for those around him.

Now, if you're sitting in this room, I think you probably don't need this lesson about greed. If you're sitting in this room, you probably don't need to be convinced that each of us is called to care for the needs of others. But if you're anything like me, at least one question for you is probably, How much? How much does it take to not be greedy? How much money and time should I give away and still have enough to take care of myself and those who depend on me? Where is the line between greed and prudence?

I wonder if what makes this such a difficult question is that, despite our best intentions, we all have a Gordon Gekko sitting on our shoulders. In the bit of Gekko's speech I quoted earlier, there's a curious turn of phrase he uses. He says "greed captures the essence of the evolutionary spirit." Evolution. I think we all have a Gordon Gekko sitting on our shoulders telling us that this is the way the world is, that each of us is in competition against all the rest; and only the strong will thrive while the weak are eliminated. He evokes evolution as the law

by which human society does and should operate because that's the law of the natural world: survival of the fittest. And if survival of the fittest as Gekko understands it is the law of human society, then greed really does seem to be the only option.

But Jesus sees something different when he looks at nature. In the gospel of Luke, right after he tells this parable of the greedy man, Jesus speaks directly and plainly to his disciples: "Therefore," he says, "do not worry about your life, what you will eat, or about your body, what you will wear. For life is more than food, and the body more than clothing. Consider the ravens: they neither sow nor reap, they have neither storehouse nor barn, and yet God feeds them. Of how much more value are you than the birds! And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? If then you are not able to do so small a thing as that, why do you worry about the rest? Consider the lilies, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin; yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, how much more will he clothe you – you of little faith! And do not keep striving for what you are to eat and what you are to drink, and do not keep worrying."

Jesus looks at the natural world and sees that its fundamental law is not greedy competition but abundant generosity. Now lest you think that the Gekko worldview is more scientifically valid, let me give an evolutionary spin to what Jesus is saying: You can look at a lion mauling an antelope and think that is the way the world is -- the strong over the weak. Or, you could look at the whole picture: the lion, the antelope, and all the amazing variety of mammals, along with the birds and the reptiles and the fish, the grasses and the trees, and the absolutely countless different species of microorganisms on which all these giant creatures depend. God has so ordered the world so that all these infinitely different forms of life have a niche in which to grow and thrive – because that is what, as I understand it, survival of the fittest really means. It's not who is strongest and has the biggest teeth – it's about having the best fit, it's about multitudes finding the best ways of being interdependent upon and interconnected with each other.

That is the world as God sees it, like a big tree in which birds of all sorts can make their nest, just as Jesus puts it in another parable. And that is the spirit of evolution by which we should order our own lives and human society. When we can silence

the dog-eat-dog voice of Gordon Gekko and instead see all the ways in which our individual fortunes are interconnected with and interdependent upon everyone else, then we can finally see how foolish greed is and how prudent generosity really is.

I'll leave you with one line by which to remember today's parable. It's a line I heard this week from someone who on the national stage gave witness to the God we worship here at SPR, to the Jesus we follow, to the Spirit who animates this community. That witness came from the Rev. William Barber in his blazing sermon to the Democratic National Convention. The line was this, "The watchword of democracy and the watchword of faith is We."