Be on Your Guard!

Vienna Presbyterian Church
The Rev. Dr. E. Stanley Ott
Luke 12:13-21

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All summer we’ve been talking about pressure points in our daily lives, such as depression, stress, guilt, anger, jealousy and so on. A few weeks ago, Glenda spoke eloquently on the topic of depression and mentioned that she had chosen the topic. Well, I didn’t choose today’s topic. When Pete gave me the date, I asked if there was a particular topic he had in mind and he smiled and said, “Greed.” Hey, the last time we did a similar series I was assigned the topic of gluttony and since greed and gluttony are related, I’m wondering if there is a subtle message here.

Think about the similarities and the differences between greed and gluttony. Clearly, they are both sins of excess. You might say that greed is the “desire to acquire” and gluttony is the “assumption of consumption.” With greed, you desire to acquire and not only to acquire but to acquire for yourself and you really don’t care what the needs of other people are. I want what I want when I want it and I want more of it and I want it for myself! If you have money and hungry people ask you for help and you just don’t care, you just want more money, that’s greed. If you take your money and spend it on that which you then consume just to serve yourself far beyond your needs, that’s gluttony.

The Wind in the Willows is a wonderful collection of stories by Kenneth Graham featuring Mr. Toad, Mole, Ratty and Badger in heart-warming adventures. It’s Mr. Toad who has some issues—he obsesses with the latest fad—especially fads that involve speed. He has greed for speed. He loves his boat, until he sees a faster horse-drawn carriage for which he suddenly has a need, a greed. He gets a carriage, which he
loves; he sees a faster bicycle for which he suddenly has a need, a greed. He loves his bicycle until he sees a faster car and suddenly he has a need, a greed, and winds up crashing seven cars and is in the hospital three times!

Years ago, I was walking down a sidewalk with a friend who was saying, “You know we bought our used Porsche Boxter sports car when we didn’t have any children but now with the kids we have a mini-van, an SUV and a sedan; the garage is full of stuff. I think I’ve got to get rid of the Boxter.” “Get rid of the Boxter?” I said. All sorts of visions began popping in my head and I said, “So, would you be open to selling it to me?” “Sure!” he said. Instantly I became Mr. Toad of Toad Hall! “What would it cost?” “Oh, I don’t know, maybe $10,000?” Well that’s a lot of money but we are talking opportunity here. Like Mr. Toad, who cares about cost! One thing about greed—it wants what it wants when it wants it and it doesn’t care about cost or consequence, which is one of the major problems with greed.

My friend and I continued walking for one whole minute with my mind buzzing with possibilities, when my cell phone rang. It was Ann Marie, at home. “Honey, remember how that violent wind storm ripped a few shingles off of our roof a few weeks ago?” “Yeah.” “Well, I had a roofer up on the roof this afternoon and he hollered down that it would be just a few hundred dollars, at which point his foot stepped on the seam between the porch roof and the main roof and his
foot sunk an inch. The drainage wasn’t done properly and he says we need a whole new roof.” “Okay,” I replied, “How much did he quote?” You can guess it. Ten thousand dollars! The Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away! Blessed be the name of the Lord.

Greed is the desire to acquire—and the desire to acquire more, more for me, more for you. For those of you who know what a Pokemon is, the Pokemon Gulpin just wants more, and more, and more! It’s greedy. Our text for this morning is from the Wonderful Gospel of Luke and it speaks clearly to this matter of greed. Someone in the crowd said to him, “Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me.” But he said to him, “Friend, who set me to be a judge or arbitrator over you?” And Jesus said to them, “Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of possessions” (Luke 12:13-16).

Someone wanted his brother to split the inheritance. We have no idea what the back-story was. Perhaps the other brother was the “older brother.” Perhaps there was a relationship problem between the brother who came to Jesus and his parents. What we do know is that he is bitter about it. Jesus replies, “Be on your guard against all kinds of greed because your life does not consist of the abundance of possessions.” Translation—your life is not your stuff—whether your stuff includes your titles, your degrees, your accomplishments, your wealth and your possessions.
“Be on your guard against all kinds of greed.” Greed is the insatiable longing for unneeded excess, especially for excess wealth, status, power or food. Using the title of Richard Foster’s brilliant book, Money, Sex and Power, greed is the insatiable desire for the unneeded excess of money, sex and power. It’s the desire to acquire that just wants “more for me.” Another way to think about greed is appetite. For example, we all have a normal appetite for food but it moves into greed when you have an insatiable desire for the unneeded excess of food—and countless other longings.

It’s not that having things, possessions, is inherently bad; however, it turns into greed when the end or focus of possessions is thinking they are what life is all about and that they are only for you. Moses spoke to the People of God saying, When you have eaten your fill and have built fine houses and live in them, and when your herds and flocks have multiplied, and your silver and gold is multiplied, and all that you have is multiplied, then do not exalt yourself, forgetting the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery (Deuteronomy 8:12-14).

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There was an interesting interview on the radio a couple of weeks ago in which the question being addressed was how much savings does a person need for retirement? The person being interviewed said, “It depends on your definition of enough-ness!” What is enough-ness of anything for you? What is enough for one person may be perceived as greed by another. While you may think it is easy to judge when you think another person is being greedy, the real question is for you, “What is enough for you—enough of whatever—enough to meet your needs, meet the needs of others and bring you joy?”

I remember, as a child, once saying to my gracious southern Louisiana grandmother after a wonderful dinner, “I’m full.” She replied, “No dear, you are not full. You’ve had a sufficiency!” Our Lord is the God of enough-ness who wants you to have a sufficiency—a sufficiency of those aspects of life that give you well-being, mentally, emotionally, physically and spiritually! When Jesus said, “Be on your guard against all kinds of greed,” he is telling us to trust God for a sufficiency of what we need.

What do we do when suddenly, like Mr. Toad, we find ourselves in the grip of an insatiable longing for some unneeded excess? Of the nine fruits of the Spirit the Apostle Paul speaks about, such as love, joy, peace, patience, the ninth fruit is self-control. The words may be understood to mean self-restraint or self-mastery. Faced with greed, you are the master of yourself with the help of the Spirit of God within you. When you are inclined to go beyond enough-ness, beyond sufficiency into greed, it’s your God-empowered self-mastery that can guide you.

Psychologist Jonathan Haidt, in his book, The Happiness Hypothesis, describes our emotional side as an elephant and
our rational side as the rider on the elephant. If the elephant gets riled up, the rider is going to have a tough time controlling it. If we use that image for the seven deadly sins of pride, lust, envy, sloth, anger, greed and gluttony, we see they are all about wanting more, more, more and once the elephant of those seven deadly sins gets riled up, it’s very difficult for the rider to control the elephant. Something or someone is going to get trampled which is why Jesus says, “Be on your guard.”

As a matter of fact, it’s quickly obvious that greed is underneath most of the other deadly sins because greed is all about wanting more—more pride, more lust, more envy, more anger. A few weeks ago, Ann Marie and I were getting ready for a trip and she gave me a bag to put in the car. I leaned it by her car door as I wasn’t sure where she wanted it. As I went to get into the driver’s seat, the automatic sprinkler system turned on getting me a little wet as I slipped into the driver’s seat. I was a teeny bit annoyed whereupon I remembered my sunglasses were in the back seat in a bag and I would have to open the back door to get them—but the sprinklers were on so why not just move the car. Oh, I’d leaned Ann Marie’s bag by her door. I could be patient and just wait for her to get in the car but instead I jump out, dash through the sprinklers, move her bag and run back through the sprinklers and jump into the car and move it, but now my legs and shorts are soaked. I become annoyed. Now there are a few anger chemicals in my bloodstream.

I move the car, get my sunglasses and Ann Marie gets in the car looking forward to our trip to see our daughter. I put the phone with GPS on the dash and as I begin to back out, she pleasantly said, “Did you put the correct address into the GPS?” A reasonable question, but I have a few annoyance
chemcials already swirling around so I think to myself, “So you think I typed in the wrong address?” Whoosh! Suddenly there are lots of anger chemicals and I realize I’m ticked off. I also realize it’s no one’s fault but mine for not being patient until she gets her bag and I can move the car, and the fact that it’s my own fault makes me madder! When I’m mad, I want more mad. Greed is the desire to acquire, not just physical possessions but the demands of the seven deadly sins. It’s easy to become greedy for grievance! Jesus said, “Be on your guard against ALL kinds of greed!

Suddenly out of absolutely nowhere, the image of the rider and the elephant popped into my mind. I took a deep breath and said, “Could we not talk at all for a while?” Ann Marie could tell from my tone of voice that there was an elephant in the car and that I needed to wait until the anger chemicals subsided. You control the elephant or the elephant controls you. Ask the Spirit of God to fill you with power and strength as you need it, and if you find an insatiable longing for whatever unneeded excess is beyond your honest capacity to control it, then seek help from others who will help you get through it.

If greed is the desire to acquire, the desire for more, more, more for me, for you, then what is its opposite? The classic opposites of greed are contentment and generosity. The Apostle Paul gives a wonderful view of contentment when he writes, for I have learned to be content with whatever I
have. I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty (Philippians 4:11-12). There is a humility to contentment and a trust in the God of enough-ness and of sufficiency to care for you. The practice of generosity, as the opposite of greed, shifts our attention from more for me to more for you out of love and service to you. As Bob Fukui puts it, “Generosity breaks the grip of greed.” The opposite of greed is all about grace, gratitude, generosity. When you have a longing for something, but choose to let it go with grace and gratitude, then generosity forms your heart and with it comes our Lord’s joy!

So a man has asked Jesus to get his brother to divide the inheritance. Jesus says to be on guard against all kinds of greed and then illustrates it with a story about a rich man. This farmer has done so well he plans to put all his efforts into building bigger barns to store all of his stuff so he can “eat, drink and be merry,” at which point God says, “You fool. This very night your life on earth will end and then who gets all your stuff?” He concludes, So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God (Luke 12:21). Jesus is clear that our Lord is more interested in us being rich toward God than rich towards ourselves.

Greed confronts all of us all of the time and the capacity of our rider to control the elephant of greed requires constant vigilance, “be on your guard,” as Jesus said. Underneath all of this is a wonderful promise in the Book of Hebrews: Be content with what you have; for Jesus has said, “I will never leave you or forsake you (Hebrews 13:5). Jesus is always with you, loving you, caring for you. If greed is all about appetite,
wanting more, then perhaps the right question is, “What do you want to be greedy for? Instead of wanting more of something, how about wanting more of someone—how about being greedy for God, greedy to know and to trust the Lord who loves you!

As Franciscan Priest Brennan Manning once said, “Jesus comes right to your seat and says, “I have a word for you. I know your whole life story. I know every skeleton in your closet. I know every moment of sin, shame, dishonesty and degraded love that has darkened your past. Right now I know your shallow faith, your feeble prayer life, your inconsistent discipleship and my word is this, ‘I dare you to trust that I love you just as you are and not as you should be because you’re never going to be as you should be.’”¹ That’s a great word from Brennan Manning. As we come to the Lord’s Table this morning, may you open yourself to the Lord who loves you just as you are and open yourself to the one who forgives your greed, creates a heart of generosity in you and who leads you to experience the power of the Spirit of God he gives to you.

For I have learned to be content with whatever I have. I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty. 

Philippians 4:11-12

¹ http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pQi_IDV2bgM