

## REFLECTION – GREED – PASTOR CALEB

1 Kings 20:1-16

So far, we have addressed pride and humility, envy and contentment, and today we talk about greed and generosity.

We are trying to take a cold-look at the way that the power of Sin grips us, but also at how we can *live into* the virtues that are alternatives to these manifestations of Sin, as we trust in the even greater power of God's Spirit that gave Christ victory over Sin and death.

Sometimes our soul-work can feel like being in the trenches, but we are assured that God's love is already greater, and God already sees in us the transformed people we can become.

These aren't exactly topics for the faint-hearted. Nor is the Bible story that [Megan] just read for us. I have given you murder stories two weeks in a row. Even if the Bible story is an extreme and egregious example of greed, don't worry: you won't get left off the hook completely.

I'm curious how many have heard the story of Naboth's vineyard? I honestly don't have a good sense of whether you have all heard this story before. *[Maybe give me a nod].*

Just to rehash the primary details. This is during the time when the nation of Israel is divided into a northern and southern kingdom. The notorious Ahab is king in the north with the capital in Samaria, but Ahab has a winter palace in Jezreel, a town at a lower elevation in the region of Galilee.

Ahab starts to eye a vineyard adjacent to the winter palace. He already has two palaces, mind you, but he wants a little more. The vineyard is owned by Naboth, a native of the town. Ahab tries to strike a deal with Naboth to sell or exchange the vineyard, with no luck.

Then he becomes pathetically depressed. His wife Jezebel hatches a plan and essentially acts with his authority to get Naboth falsely accused of a crime and executed. Naboth is out of the way, so Ahab takes the land. But we don't want to know how often this kind of thing still happens today.

I want to make some observations about greed – both digging into this story and looking at a few other biblical citations.

The first observation is that greed is wanting more.

That's pretty simple. Ahab and Jezebel weren't satisfied with what they had – two palaces after all. They want more.

Maybe you are satisfied and happy with what you have. You aren't wanting more. That might not let you off the hook, because the softer form of greed is hoarding or holding too tightly onto what we have.

In Luke 12:15, Jesus tells his listeners, "Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; life does not consist in an abundance of possessions."

Then Jesus goes on to tell a parable of a man who has such an abundant harvest he doesn't have a place to store it. Rather than give it away, he builds bigger barns so he can keep it and retire.

Seems innocent enough by our cultural standards. Yet Jesus criticizes the man for storing up things for himself rather than being rich toward God.

The second observation I want to make – going back to King Ahab – is that greed is a form of idolatry.

This link is subtle in the story of Ahab and Naboth, but it's there. Verses 25 and 26 summarize his reign as follows: <sup>25</sup> (There was never anyone like Ahab, who sold himself to do evil in the eyes of the LORD, urged on by Jezebel his wife. <sup>26</sup> He behaved in the vilest manner by going after idols, like the Amorites the LORD drove out before Israel.)

When the prophet Elijah confronts him, he asks Ahab: "because you have sold yourself to do evil in the eyes of the LORD."

So instead of Naboth selling the vineyard like Ahab wanted, Ahab has sold himself. Greed, like any manifestation of sin, can enslave us.

When we get to our Gospel passage later on, we will see that Jesus puts it very starkly – you can't serve both God and money. Wealth and possessions are not evil – they are necessary to life. But they are addictive, and they convince us to give the part of our heart that we need to give to God in order to be spiritually free.

The third observation is that greed, like other sins, infects us as individuals, and it infects our culture, our systems, and our institutions.

Going back to our story, there is a reason that Naboth didn't want to sell his land. He says simply in verse 3: "The LORD forbid that I should give you the inheritance of my ancestors."

The Israelites, in theory anyway, intended for land to be divided among different families and remain within those families. This was so that it didn't get bought up by massive landowners, which would leave a class of people that were landless, dispossessed, and perpetually poor.

This is why they had a provision called the year of Jubilee – spelled out in detail in Leviticus 25. In verse 23, God says, "The land must not be sold permanently, because the land is mine and you reside in my land as foreigners and strangers."

Instead of being sold permanently, the Jubilee system allowed land to be leased, essentially selling the right to plant and harvest. But every 50 years, there was a year of Jubilee in which the land went back to its original owners.

There isn't clear evidence that the whether year of Jubilee was ever actually practiced. But it was at least on the books. And it was for the same principle that Naboth refused to sell.

That's a contrast from how our system operates, and a major contrast from the shadow side of our country's history. There is a sad story of how our country took over this land that once

belonged to indigenous people groups. The land we are on now, would have overlapped between the Osage, Kaw, Wichita, Comanche, and Sioux tribes.

Eventually I will inherit some acres in Iowa. We inherited land that we didn't have to pay the true price of. We benefit from the prosperity of this country built up by the labor of enslaved Africans Americans, and though this is many years passed, this dark history continues a legacy of poverty and racial discrimination.

When we read the Bible, most of us are used to what is called the fairy tale princess reading. We identify with the good guys: with the Israelites, but not the Egyptians. With the disciples, but not with the pharisees. In this story, we sympathize with Naboth, and no doubt feel we are ordinary people like him. What if we are rather descendants of Ahab and Jezebel? How does that change how we hear the story?

These are heavy and hard questions.

Once again, the three observations I made are: greed is never feeling you have enough. Greed is putting something else in God's place. And greed is a systemic or cultural sin as well as an individual sin.

What now? We are called to repent of whatever ways greed has made inroads into our own souls, including our tendency to grip what we have too tightly.

Repentance, of course, is not just saying we're caught up in wrongdoing, but doing something to change course.

As we engage that process of repentance, we make some commitments.

The first is that we commit ourselves to cultivating hearts of generosity, which many of you already profoundly exemplify.

An additional commitment we can make is learning more about how we can give our time and energy in ways to combat systemic poverty and racism, to seek to reparations where the system has unfairly benefited us.

There's a learning process, naturally. I can understand that not all of us will agree that systemic poverty or systemic racism really exist. Or you may feel you have had enough major obstacles in your life you don't feel you would owe anything or could do anything.

We don't all have to think alike or be on the same page, as long as each of us also doesn't close the door to learning more.

After three weeks, you've probably caught on to the patter of a reflection on one of the deadly sins, then a short spiritual practice to integrate in your daily life, then learning about the alternative way in God's economy.

We are doing this because Sin is a disorientation or perversion of the love of God that God graciously gives to us. We believe God's primary love gift to humanity is Jesus Christ. From this gift follow all the rest of God's good gifts.

Spiritual practices allow us in small ways to receive the love of God in order to allow it to flow through us to others.

Today's practice is gratitude. I've mentioned it before. It can be as simple as keeping a gratitude journal – which I know some of you do, or sharing about something you are grateful for at the dinner table.

Bringing our focus to what we are grateful for, doesn't take away the imperfection of our lives, but it does rewire our thinking to remember that we have abundantly received from the God who loves us.

As we pause, take a few moments to share something that you are grateful for today or this week. You can do this by yourself, with members of your household, whoever is with you in the vehicle, or whoever is within earshot in the next chair or vehicle over.

You also have permission to also name something that you lament or grieve right now. Sometimes naming that first makes it easier to name what you are grateful for as well.

*[Prayer of confession, and words of assurance of God's grace]*

## REFLECTION – GENEROSITY

Matthew 6:19-34

So what can I possibly say about the huge topic of generosity, or about this teaching of Jesus from the Sermon on the Mount that itself is a treasure trove to keep us hear all afternoon?

For this moment, I'm not going to give you principles to follow for your giving or advise on how to budget for giving, though that certainly has its place. I'm not so prideful as to think that I'll convince you in a few minutes to make drastic changes in how you use money.

There's also not time to address the important subtopic of how to be generous in ways that empower those who are poor, without removing their own agency to lead themselves out of poverty.

Jesus said, "where your treasure is, there your heart is also." So I want to talk about a heart issue. How do our souls find healing from the virus of greed we have been infected with from our over-anxious culture, and instead be freed to generously offering ourselves, because our identity is secure in God who loves us?

With all of the economic uncertainty that the pandemic creates for us, many of us are forced to work on this heart issue. I've been challenged different times on where my heart lies, so I'll start with a brief story of one of those times.

Some years ago, when I was a service worker in Honduras I was on my way with other MCC colleagues for a regional gathering in Nicaragua. Incidentally, I had just returned from a trip to the US and had minimal luggage, because my main luggage hadn't made it back before I needed to board a bus for Nicaragua.

At border we all had to get off the bus in order to go file past officials checking papers. A colleague of mine named Rachael was talking to some children congregating in the area to ask travelers for things. I noticed and was impressed that she gave away one of her shirts that a girl could use.

Afterwards, I asked her if she had needed that shirt. Yes, but it's OK. I then said, my problem-solving gears churning, "maybe I should get some extra shirts at a thrift store and just have them packed in case."

Sensing a problem with that attitude, she responded, "well, then it's not really a gift if it didn't cost you anything." That's true.

At first glance, I don't think of myself as dealing with greed. Certainly not in an overt way. I don't consciously wish for more than I have most of the time. But I do tend to be very frugal with money, and I tend to live with an anxious sense of scarcity about not only my money, but also my time and emotional energy. I'm nervous anything or anyone making demands of me.

It's true it's important for all of us to have a healthy sense of boundaries in how we give of ourselves – we can't after all give what we don't have to give. And the paradox or tension we live with is that we may be called to give of ourselves in ways that challenge our feeling of being in control or feeling secure about the future.

The passage from Matthew has teaching about money in three chunks. There's the part about storing treasure for yourself in heaven. Then the part about your eye as the lamp of the body. Then a strong statement that we can't serve both God and wealth. Finally, Jesus rounds it out with a parable about God taking care of the flowers and the birds, that we typically think is a change of topic.

I'll give a few brief observations about these segments.

I grew up thinking about "storing up treasure in heaven" as though there is a heavenly bank account, and doing good deeds gets you more money up there. In Matthew, "heaven" is code language for God. To store treasure in heaven is to give God that primary place in our hearts. Is your heart in serving God and living your life in a way that aims to bless and love other people, or does your heart lie with things, and with the control and sense of status they give us.

Next Jesus talks about the eye as the lamp of the body. Ancient people believed that the eye gave light that indicated whether a person had inner light or inner darkness. A healthy eye is a generous eye that has singular focus allowing it to see God's abundance rather than seeing only scarcity.

The "evil eye" is the opposite. We can fill out that meaning by recalling the parable of the workers in the vineyard from last week. To the workers that are angry that the vineyard owner is paying the same wage to those who worked a partial day, the owner asks (translated word-for-word), "is your eye evil because I am good?" (Matt 20:15).

In the next example (verse 24), Jesus creates a stark choice between serving either God or serving "mammon" (Aramaic word for wealth and possessions). It is not that mammon or

wealth is bad in of itself. The problem is that like anything else in all creation, we can easily put it in the place of God, which is idolatry.

When Jesus begins with a poetic teaching about not worrying (starting verse 25), we think he has changed topics. In the church, we typically use this passage simply to talk about worrying as a moral failure, without addressing just what we might be worried about. For those of us, like myself, with a tendency toward the emotion of anxiety, we can then feel guilty for having that feeling.

A Colombian missionary I worked with like to say that *we are called to give not out of our surplus, but simply out of what we have*. Jesus' teaching on "not worrying" squarely addresses just that. If I want to feel in control, then I will hold onto everything that I think I need, and then think of myself as generous because there is a surplus – maybe even a significant surplus – that I set aside to give.

Jesus' words might not seem completely accurate if taken literally. Not every bird or flower turns out OK. I have two responses.

First, let's be clear that God won't send cash from the sky. But if we let go of our pride a little, we do have a community of people who care and will help if we are willing to ask.

Second, we need to accept our vulnerability rather than expecting to be in control all the time. The prophet Isaiah compared his people like grass that dries up. We have to accept that we aren't in control, and we aren't entitled to have all our needs met all the time, and we won't live forever. For many of you, it may not be financial scarcity that teaches this, but unexpected medical conditions or terminal illness. The lesson is pretty much the same, and we will all be forced to learn it sooner or later.

I know it sounds depressing, but *that's* what I think Jesus was talking about. So he says, "don't worry." Why compound our suffering with fruitless striving if we can instead embrace God's gifts to us in the good and bad of life as they come to us?

The spiritual discipline becomes offering those anxious feelings to God, while also seeking wisdom for how we will give.

Giving itself is a spiritual discipline. Large gifts, budgeting, and planning for giving are important. But also important is giving on a small scale with frequency in order to become an engrained habit that impacts the generosity of our hearts, just as much as the generosity of our hearts impacts what we give.

The heart issue, once again, is not the size of your giving, but whether you are freed for a generous spirit when not in control, when you are not certain of the future, because you have an underlying abiding trust that *it's OK*.

May God give us all a spirit of generosity with leading of the Spirit, so that we can share God's love with the world in the same way that Jesus shared of himself.