

Proper 13 Year C 2025

“Greed, for lack of a better word, is good. Greed is right. Greed works. Greed clarifies and cuts through and captures the essence of the evolutionary spirit. Greed in all its forms: Greed for money, for love, for life, for knowledge, has marked the upward surge of mankind. And greed, you mark my words, will not only save our company [sic], but will save that other malfunctioning corporation called the U.S.A.”

Those are the famous words of Gordon Gekko, the investment banker villain in the 1987 movie *Wall Street*. Prophetic words, right? They describe our present situation in this country to a “T.” For two and a half centuries we have called ourselves a nation governed by the consent of the people, a modern democracy with checks and balances, guardrails, to protect us from the designs of tyranny. But the truth is: we have always been first and foremost an economic system. Wealth the unspoken goal. Our government’s first priority has always been the accumulation of wealth... and wealth, not for everyone; but wealth for those in power, the elite. Despite our high-minded philosophical acclamations about the equality of all of our citizens in the Bill of Rights; the reality is that the ideal of equality, since the beginning of this nation, was an empty slogan. We live in a country with abundant resources, a land of plenty, but that abundance has not been shared. It has and continues to be controlled by the elite, the wealthy, the powerful. Economies are not discreet autonomous systems. They don’t

operate by some benign inherent order. They are driven by philosophical and moral choices.... And at least since the Bronze Age some seven thousand years ago, those choices have been made entirely by those in power. And power corrupts; and greed is the name of such corruption. All so-called civilizations that we know of, including our own, have been founded on greed and the violence that greed engenders. Since time immemorial the powerful have conquered the lands of the weak... and in the mythological histories of the succession of empires we declare such conquests as progress, as... “good.”

In our world today it is become glaringly apparent that greed is the Achilles’ heel of modern Capitalism. Adam Smith, the erudite philosopher and moralist of the 18th century articulated the vision of so-called “free enterprise;” that rational self-interest and competition would assure prosperity... prosperity for the wealthy, and subsistence for the laboring class.... Smith wrote at a time when modern democracy was emerging, and the vision of a prosperous society, in which all people had a say was seductive... an ideal for its time. Smith felt that there would always be an elite class, the powerful and well educated, but that it would be in their interest to allow prosperity to trickle down to the so-called lower classes (we know how that worked out, right?), and that there would be some mobility between the two.... But what Smith did not consider in his vision of capitalism, an economy curated by a benevolent invisible hand... what he failed to

consider was society's insatiable capacity for greed. As it turns out, the invisible hand, was and is the hand of the powerful.

In our own economy, we have witnessed the effects of the failings of capitalism.... In 1929 and in 2008 our economy collapsed, due quite simply to greed. The investment banking industry managed in the 1990's to get repealed the Glass Steagall act, which was placed into effect after the Great Depression to protect us from the Banking and investment industry having too much power, having unbridled access to too many markets.... The New Deal under Roosevelt, wherein government invested capital into the economic system as stimulus, through a progressive tax structure, creating a vibrant middle class, saved the solvency of this country following the Great Depression. That policy, along with the advocacy of Labor Unions, forged a partnership between the working class and the wealthy elite. Not without challenge. For four decades, the middle class grew and thrived. People bought homes, paid their medical bills, sent their children to college.... White people mind you.... People of color, despite a socialist democratic tweak upon a capitalistic system, languished still under oppressive feudalism. But the emergence of civil rights in the fifties and sixties gave hope that even formerly enslaved people might have a place at the table of plenty. If one measured prosperity by GNP, the Capitalist system excelled under the moral choices of responsible government. But those choices were anomalous to our history, and short lived. That delicate partnership began to unravel under the Reagan administration; and is in tatters today. The disparity now

between rich and poor is growing exponentially... the middle class, which emerged during the industrial revolution and throughout the twentieth century is disappearing.... With few exceptions, people of color are still left behind. We should have known better... because we've seen it throughout human history... that Greed, unchecked, is not in our best interest. It is not good. It is not right, it is unjust, and it is not sustainable. If we are to survive as a species, the God of Greed must be dethroned. Impeached?

So, why Jim, you may ask, why another lecture on macroeconomics? This is church.... Because at least according to Luke, it is an issue with which Jesus was preoccupied. Three fourths of the parables in Luke deal with wealth, and in particular, that wealth was held disproportionately by an elite few. Some things never change. The economy in Palestine at the time of Jesus was mostly agricultural. All of the land was owned by the wealthy elite, many of whom were absentee, that is, they lived in other parts of the empire. The populace would work the land on barely a living wage, while the landowners collected big profits. The landowner in our story isn't satisfied with things as they are. He wants more... bigger barns for bigger profits, all on the backs of the working class. He's hoarding while the population is literally hungry.

The mantra that Greed is good... or, more politely, that wealth, and power, are an intelligent expediency... or that it is just the way things work in the world... that in the evolutionary process, the strong survive.... These are the words of the greatest lie over human history... the greatest illusion... the greatest evil.... It is at the heart of our warring

world, and millions upon millions over the centuries have lost their lives because of it.... This is not just a crisis of economics... it is a philosophical, moral, and spiritual crisis.... It always has been. Greed is the cause of most of our social, economic, and political dysfunction: Our healthcare system and life-saving drugs are becoming unaffordable because they are tied to corporate profit; our prison population is by far the largest in the world, because now most prisons and detention centers are privatized, for profit. Incarceration is big business. The goal of the current autocracy is to privatize social security, Medicare, Medicaid, and other agencies managed by the government.... Profit, the goal. We are the most warring nation in the world over the last hundred and fifty years.... Why? Because war is good for business. Gun violence in our country is out of control because our legislators are in the pocket of the gun manufacturers. I could go on, but you get the point.

Luke warns us in the words of Jesus that greed is the human community's undoing.... That greed is not good, and, as Luke puts it, we are to be rich towards God... He is naming humankind's predisposition to greed and power... he is encouraging his community of believers to live into the virtue of generosity.... Greed is the idolatry of wealth.... Generosity is to be rich toward God... that was countercultural then, and it is countercultural now. What makes us truly rich, Luke tells us, is the way we live our lives... living in the God process; the process of generosity, of seeing the other as human; of welcome and hospitality; of proximity and care and empathy to and for those who are left

out. The way of Jesus, in short. Jesus never asked to be worshipped. He simply asked that we love our neighbor... which is to be rich toward God. The practice of the good is a rose among the thorns and ruins of our world; a rose... a witness to an alternative way of life; that perhaps one day the world might see, and come to its senses.

It is helpful to me to think of God as process... To think of God not as the all-powerful male Deity ensconced in the heavens, but to think of God as the very process of vulnerability, of generosity, of welcome, of sacrifice, and compassion, and self-less interest... that, of course, is a choice, a predisposition in-formed by practice... that we are each day offered the choice of participating in the process of God.... We call God Trinity... God who is still creating the world.... The Son who is still being begotten in the human community, and the Spirit that moves and transforms the world toward the good and the true. "All things work for the good for those who love God," Paul writes to the church in Rome.... And Luke is not talking about a way that we find personal fulfillment... you know.... That wealth won't make you happy thing... Luke is talking about the means of restoration of the world, the means of salvation, salvation being the raising up of the economically wounded of our world... He is talking about the means of God's jubilee... God's jubilee, not an end but a process.... God's economic dream for the world, if you will; is that abundance is shared and redistributed for the good of the whole. Capitalism is failing us because the engine of Capitalism is greed; and greed begets injustice and

violence. The world needs the generous and just qualities of love, that fosters a community of equals.

Our culture teaches us that bigger and better is that to which we aspire... and the church, alas, has bought in... that the church should be bigger and better... the rich fool in our parable is building a new barn that is huge... the best barn you've ever seen.... And I want to say that the kingdom of God is not something bigger and better... that, too, is idolatry.... The kingdom of God is the size of a mustard seed.... And our vocation as the baptized is to plant, in love, the seeds of this kingdom.... Love takes root in the ambiguous soil that is the process called life... the kingdom of God is not big; it is not a grand Utopia; it is manifest in every act of love, no matter how small... Greed cannot stand in the face of love. The life of the world is sustained, despite its brokenness and dysfunction, by God's people bearing love to the world; by choosing to be in the process, a process that is at the heart of God....

Luke calls those who make the choice for hyper-self-interest, ...fools. The Greek word for fool literally translated means "empty one;" an artful contrast to being rich in God.... But no one is born foolish.... One must choose to be a fool. May we, brothers and sisters, each day, choose the enlightened path of Truth. It is a choice for true freedom; true liberty; true equality, true wealth. And that choice is our only hope.