

Shiloh United Methodist Church

Matthew 4:1-11

Rev. Tyler Amundson March 1, 2020

Richness of the Poor

Matthew 4:1-11 Common English Bible (CEB)

4 Then the Spirit led Jesus up into the wilderness so that the devil might tempt him. ² After Jesus had fasted for forty days and forty nights, he was starving. ³ The tempter came to him and said, “Since you are God’s Son, command these stones to become bread.”

⁴ Jesus replied, “It’s written, *People won’t live only by bread, but by every word spoken by God.*”

⁵ After that the devil brought him into the holy city and stood him at the highest point of the temple. He said to him, ⁶ “Since you are God’s Son, throw yourself down; for it is written, *I will command my angels concerning you, and they will take you up in their hands so that you won’t hit your foot on a stone.*”

⁷ Jesus replied, “Again it’s written, *Don’t test the Lord your God.*”

⁸ Then the devil brought him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory. ⁹ He said, “I’ll give you all these if you bow down and worship me.”

¹⁰ Jesus responded, “Go away, Satan, because it’s written, *You will worship the Lord your God and serve only him.*” ¹¹ The devil left him, and angels came and took care of him.

The season before Easter is known as Lent in the Christian church. In popular culture Christians are known to give up something for Lent. Probably 99% of the sermons and messages delivered in churches today will riff on some understanding of giving up something for lent or doing an alternative to giving something up. At some point giving up chocolate for Lent was the thing to do. However, what we need to remember is that this season was when in the ancient early church people prepared for their baptism on Easter. They learned the spiritual practices of the faith. Practices that would help them live a new life in connection with God, Christ and the Holy Spirit. These practices became what we know as disciplines and later many would become sacraments to be practiced to maintain an ordered relationship with God.

As Christians practiced these disciplines of the faith a few became driven to go out into the desert or wilderness and practice each of them deeply. During their time of practicing away from others they developed an understanding around the 4th century in the Common Era(CE) that there were certain sins that humans committed with regularity that disordered their love with God. At some point these were codified and even popularized as “The Seven Deadly Sins.” Sometimes it is 8 depending on who you ask. The sins can be seen tied into our movies of today, and reach back to the works of Plato and Aristotle.

During Lent we are going to look at each of the sins and share how an understanding of Christ might guide us to order our loves in the world toward God.

Before I go any further I want to share a story:

The Old Man and the Golden Fish

A Traditional Chinese Folktale

Retold by Hoh Chee Bin from China

In this story, an old fisherman receives something wonderful, but then his greed for more good things leads to grief.

There was once an old man who liked fishing. He always fished in a lake, which was near his house. One day, the old man brought his fishing rod and fishing tackle and went out to the lake to fish after he had eaten his dinner.

When he reached the lake, the sky was becoming dark. There was a boat beside the lake. The old man used the boat and rowed to the center of the lake. He began fishing in the center of the lake. After a while, he fell asleep.

Suddenly, the old man woke up as his fishing rod was shaking. The old man pulled up the fishing rod and caught a fish. To his surprise, it was a golden fish.

Even more surprising, it could talk to the old man. "Can you let me go, please?" The fish begged the old man. "No, I am going to eat you," The old man said. "Please! Let me go. If you let me go, I will give a golden rope," the fish said.

"Golden rope? Is that true? How can I trust you?" the old man asked. "You can put your fishing rod into the lake and a few minutes after, you are going to get the golden rope, " said the fish.

The old man listened to the fish and put the fishing rod in to the lake. After he pulled up the fishing rod, he saw a golden rope attached to the fishing line. The golden rope must be very long the old man thought because he could not see the end of the golden rope. The man was very happy and he continued to pull up the golden rope.

"Let me go now that you have the golden rope," said the fish . "No, I won't let you go. I am going to sell you. I think someone will pay a very high price to get you." The old man said. The man then put the fish into a container, which was full of water and continued to up the golden rope.

As the man pulled up the golden rope, his boat began to sink into the lake but he was too greedy and still wanted to get all of the golden rope. He continued to pull it. Finally, his boat sank completely into the lake, and the old man died.¹

Greed, one of the seven deadly sins, and may be one of the most challenging is know by a few other names: avarice and pleonexia. Many of us will be familiar with avarice in some way. In a movie I saw growing up there was a line that someone

¹ <http://www.topics-mag.com/folk-tales/folk-tale-greed-china.htm>

would be wealthy if they did an awful act, “beyond the dreams of avarice.” Avarice really is just a more potent word for greed in our language today and is more synonymous than anything. Pleonexia on the other hand, is one I want to focus on. Pleonexia is greed in Greek, and in the definition of one of my teachers it is, “the disease of never enough.”

I like Pleonexia as a word for greed, because it sounds like a disease and it sounds like there might be a pill I can take for that to clear all the problems of greed up. If only that were true.

In fact it seems that the Biblical writers know pleonexia is such a timeless human disease that they include this story in Matthew about Christ. God’s self incarnated in human flesh is placed in 3 scenarios with a devil like character. I want to stop for a quick minute to point out that while we think this is the devil, it is clear from the greek translations this is some embodiment of evil, but not who we would associate as the devil with horns and pitchforks. This character is meant to remind us that internal to all humanity, even that of Christ, there is the desire for control.

I have often said that it would have been easier to tempt Jesus with a look into a loving home, a warm fire, and a meal with friends and family than what the devil chooses to use. However, this is where I want to point out what we heard in scripture today were 3 temptations and in the gospel of Matthew they are setting us up to notice what Jesus’ ministry will be about. Jesus’ will be the opposite of greed, or pleonexia, it will be about teaching rules of “gratitude for God” and “God’s true justice.”

Justice being defined as, “Getting what rightfully belongs to someone.” Jesus’ temptations are temptations we each face when we face the greed in our world. Like us Jesus faced taking control when it seems we may not have enough to survive, a desire to test God when we feel our control has been taken, and finally a desire to seize control when it seems the world would be better if we were in charge.

All 3 of these deal with greed, because the disease of never enough is not about over doing it for the sake of overdoing it. No, the reality is greed happens because we get a taste of control and we want more. Later in Matthew in the Beatitudes, Jesus’ moral teachings Christ says, “Blessed are the poor in Spirit, for they will inherit the kingdom of heaven.” He is not stating this to indicate that poor in spirit means people who have never had belongings of any kind. He is indicating that people who have not overly indulged in the control of the world through the accumulation of money and stuff can more easily find God’s vision for the world. In fact those most out of control, not seeking control through the means of this world can find God easier.

The other citation from Matthew is one many of us know. “A camel could pass through the eye of a needle, easier that a rich man can see the kingdom of God.” We simply must recognize what scripture knows to be true, even writers as far back as Aristotle knew, that we are prone to greed, we are prone to want control. And we a prone once we taste control to want to maintain it by continuing to gain money and things that give us control.

Many of us remember the movie *Oceans 11*, in the movie in Daniel Ocean is a sophisticated thief and together with his gang

of 11 they rob a lucrative Las Vegas Casino. The casino belongs to a man referred to by his last name, Benedict. We learn part way through the movie that Benedict has married Daniel Ocean's ex-wife, Tess. We also learn Daniel is trying to win her back. After realizing he won't get anything out of Daniel, Benedict lets him go, but not before an exchange happens in which Benedict reveals where his true love lives:
Money or Relationship

Watch: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-T3mnDP_isM

I shared at the beginning that the ancient Christians described it when we leaned into sin too heavily as our loves being disordered. Do we turn to loving the control, the things and money that gain us things or do we turn into loving relationship.

As Christians the question becomes do we turn into right relationship with money and things, so that we can see and experience God's love for us.

A group of students was challenged by a teacher once that if they truly had right relationship with things, they could survive with two pairs of clothes. One for dressing nice and the other for dressing regular. This teacher had done it, so the students followed suit. In fact, to the point of gaining the attention of the college newspaper who followed their faithful journey of living with less. The students shared the freedom they found in not being bound to so many decisions in the morning, to not needing to look for new styles to fill a void in their lives, and a righting of relationship with what clothing really meant.

Opportunities to recognize when less is enough is a great practice. It helps us to understand why we don't need the extra pair of shoes, the most recent device, that the next purchase

from Target, Amazon, or Wal-Mart will not ultimately make our lives more perfect. Now granted abstaining from things like these students did, students whose parents still paid their \$100,000 tuition at a prestigious school, seems small. However, in the scheme of the world, when we rank among the richest people just by living in this country. Whenever, we abstain and send our resources to a place who has stated a need, we engage in an act of disobedience, and we fool the tempting of fear.

When we abstain from the advertise driven culture that has convinced us more will make the world more complete for us. We participate in a daily discipline that supports the grace of God. When we learn what greed is in our lives with an end to be more like Jesus, hopefully God can wiggle into the situation to remind us where we might give up something else for God.

The reason avarice or greed is so dangerous and is something that draws us out of our loves being aligned to God is that when we take more and more to attempt to satisfy our control, we inevitably take it away from someone else. If we hoard money we rob other people of the chance to earn it and use it to meet their needs, if we hoard things we build up collections that have use only to us in our lifetimes and burden others with cleaning up what might be treasures to us, but are junk to them, and if we hoard control we hoard isolating power that could be used to help other people find connection and purpose in their lives.

Greed can easily take hold of the human heart because all it takes is us saying, "Mine."

C.S. Lewis in 1941 published *The Screwtape Letters*, a fictitious book about a devil figure writing to his son, another devil. In it

he outlined the goal if they were to outsmart God to gain control of the world for the sake of fear and evil.

And all the time the joke is that the word “Mine” in its fully possessive sense can- not be uttered by a human being about anything. in the long run either our father or the enemy will say “Mine” of each thing that exists, and specially of each man. they will find out in the end, never fear, to whom their time, their souls, and their bodies really belong — certainly not to them, whatever happens. at present the enemy says “Mine” of everything on the pedantic, legalistic ground that he made it: our father hopes in the end to say “Mine” of all things on the more realistic and dynamic ground of conquest.

I think most recently I saw this play out around the Corona Virus outbreak. The WHO(World Health Organization) was taking the outbreak seriously, and people were already getting anxious. However, when it impacted the markets, cruise ships, and potential consumer goods the fear ratcheted up. World pandemic had already been a concern, but it was the everyday things it could interrupt, not even necessarily the deaths it might cause that seemingly grabbed the public attention.

This is why I am going to suggest as I believe the Bible points to in Christ’s living, the hospitality codes of the Old Testament and even a letter the Hebrews which says, “Hebrews 13:5-6

Common English Bible (CEB)

5 Your way of life should be free from the love of money, and you should be content with what you have. After all, he has said,

I will never leave you or abandon you. 6 This is why we can confidently say,
The Lord is my helper,
and I won't be afraid.
What can people do to me?"

The practice of tithing is what they are pointing to. Give to God first. And I know you hear me talk about this at least once a year. However, in our culture I think it is so important. Tithing means taking your first money and giving it back to God, and for me this means church and community organizations that hold your ideals. What this does is say, "Despite that I may not have enough for all I want, I trust God to help me use what I have to support others and sustain myself. I will have enough."

Doing this helps us find the sabbath from our natural tendency to replace God with money or stuff. We are relieved the anxiety of needing to gather future acquisitions to control our destiny, which we trust is in God's hands.

Or if we had an advertisement for a healthy treatment of Pleonexia it would look like this one from Harper's Magazine.

Do you remember all of the things you told me you wanted as a child?

Well, your list may have changed, but I'll bet it hasn't gotten any shorter.

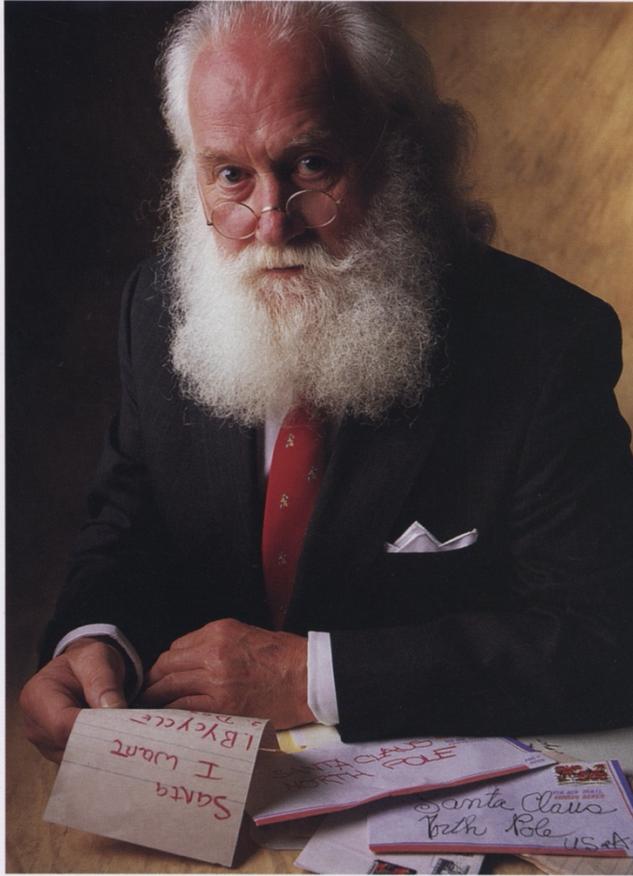
Perhaps you shouldn't be worried about that.

Greed has always motivated men and women. It has motivated inventors to make better mousetraps, artists to create greater art and scientists to find cures for diseases and pathways to the moon.

Just be sure to use your greed to good ends. Be greedy for knowledge. Be greedy for the kind of success that helps you, your family and your friends. Be greedy for love.

Just don't be greedy in ways that hurt others.

Remember, I'll always be the first one to know if you've been bad or good. So be good for goodness sake.



The world's foremost authority speaks out on the subject of greed.

The problem with being rich in things and money is we start to believe we can solve all problems with our checkbook or credit card. Some of the simplest things in our lives, even the chance to live itself can't be solved with money: relationships, enjoying a beautiful day, or a good belly laugh cannot be bought. In fact, for those who think it can, they will find it easier to drive a Cadillac through a revolving door.

Greed, pleonexia's goal is to take over God's role and is really just our individual attempt to make sure we get what we want. It is to provide fully for ourselves and not have to depend on God.

I leave us with this lesson from one of the first Christians to write on greed:

A Monk with many possessions in a boat is more vulnerable to a storm, just as a leaky ship is submerged with each wave.

So a person with many possessions is awash in their concerns, (and misses out on the love of God).

-Evagrias of Pontus