

Get Ready! The Kingdom is Coming.

A Sermon preached for North Presbyterian Church

On August 11, 2013 by Cathy M. Kolwey

During the month of August we are going to be exploring Luke. The gospel of Luke is the most radical, most challenging of the gospels because it is written with a particular motive in mind. While the stories of Jesus are recounted in a linear, chronological fashion, the author also weaves in this metaphorical layer so that woven into the actual account of Jesus on a journey to Jerusalem, there is also this metaphorical journey of Jesus on a quest to bring about the Kingdom of God. It is in Luke where we meet the Jesus who lifts up women, and eats with sinners. It is in Luke, more than any other Gospel, where Jesus cares for the poor and the outcasts all in the name of bringing about the Kingdom of God. (The debate is still out on whether Luke intends that Kingdom to come here on Earth or later in Heaven.)

Today we are presented with two of the tougher messages from Jesus. These scriptures are often passed over by pastors in their sermon writing because they are difficult topics. At first glance, it may seem like Jesus is admonishing the wealthy, and saying that as Christians we need to give up our money to follow God. It may seem like Jesus is calling us into a life of poverty. Most preachers don't want to be the ones to bring that message to their congregations. But If we study the scriptures a little more closely, that is not actually what it says. I don't believe Jesus is calling us to give away all of our worldly goods and live a life of poverty. No, I think instead, He is calling us to live a life of contentment. This is not about wealth vs. poverty; it is about longing vs. contentment. Today we will explore what these two scriptures, not looking at what they say about wealth, but exploring what they tell us about longing.

The first story in our scriptures from Luke is the parable of the rich fool. Jesus is pushed by someone in the crowd, who is trying to get Jesus to tell his brother to share his money with him. Here's what Luke 12 says:

Luke 12:13-21 (NRSV)

¹³ Someone in the crowd said to Jesus, "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me." ¹⁴ But he said to him, "Friend, who set me to be a judge or arbitrator over you?" ¹⁵ And he 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." ¹⁶ Then

he told them a parable: “The land of a rich man produced abundantly. ¹⁷ And he thought to himself, ‘What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?’ ¹⁸ Then he said, ‘I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. ¹⁹ And I will say to my soul, Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.’ ²⁰ But God said to him, ‘You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?’ ²¹ So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God.”

The essence of Jesus message here is not about money or wealth; but about greed. The Greek word for greed in this passage is PLEONEXIA, which translates to “a hunger or longing for more”. Jesus is warning about that insatiable greed, where nothing is ever enough. It is the longing - the want - that we need to worry about, not necessarily the actual physical wealth. Jesus’ warning against this insatiable greed is a timely message for us today, and our consumer driven society.

So let’s look deeper at what this concept of PLEONEXIA, or the constant hunger for more, does to us as people and as a society. This insatiable drive for more is not merely about money or wealth. You don’t have to be rich to be caught in its trap. Greed has the ability to possess us all, whether we make \$1 million dollars a year or just \$10,000 a year. So let’s look more closely at what this type of greed really does to us.

The first thing that greed does to us is to trap us in a scarcity mentality. This idea of scarcity fosters the belief that there is simply not enough for everyone in the world. This longing for “more” then becomes a protection against the uncertainties of the future. We justify to ourselves why we have to work from this mentality. Fear becomes more motivational than faith. Getting “as much as possible” now means that we won’t have to worry about tomorrow; except that “as much as possible” turns into limitless want. It haunts us, we can never be filled. The scarcity mentality ignites the hunger for more that Jesus warns about in this parable.

The second thing that greed does is breed competition. When we buy into the scarcity mentality, we start to believe that there are limited resources, it leads to competitiveness because we start to think that one person can win the prize. This pits us against one another and destroys our natural inclination to help each other. In academics and political science, they call this the zero sum game: it is the idea that for me to win, you have to lose. It is this idea (which again, is rooted in the belief that there are limited resources) that is so insidious and goes against the Gospel message that God provides abundantly. Personally, I believe that the vast majority of the world’s problems stem from this idea of the zero sum game – that for me to have enough, I have to take from someone else who will not have enough. This mentality of competitive scarcity and the greed

of always longing for more is what will lead us into thinking things like “not all people deserve access to food” or “it’s okay if that worker doesn’t earn a living wage”. If we believe in this idea of competitive scarcity, then we start to think, “As long as I get the new Iphone 7, I don’t have to think about how it was made”. This competitive thinking is so compelling; it can lead to the dehumanization of the poor or needy and the exploitation of the worker. It was the competitive nature of the rich fool in the story that led him to think that he should build bigger barns, instead of share his abundant crop with others.

The third thing that greed does is lead to excess living. It leads to a lifestyle of hoarding. The insidious part of that greed, that “longing for more”, is that no matter how much you have, it is never enough. This is why I say that Jesus is not talking about money here. Because you can have money and still be content. There is nothing wrong with owning an iphone. But it is when we get trapped into longing for the latest and the greatest that it becomes a problem; when we want to anti-up our technology even though our phone works perfectly well, just because there is something better out there. It is not owning the phone that is bad; it is constantly wanting the “better” technology that is dangerous.

I had my own harsh reality check on this one, the last time I went to my parent’s house. I opened up the kitchen cabinets and saw the white plastic plates with the pink roses that used to be at my Grandma Kate’s house. This was not in any way fine China – but plastic plates (the really durable plastic that was made in the 30’s and 40’s) that I had seen my Grandmother use her entire life. She had probably paid a nickel each for them. And I scolded my mom, “What are you using these plates for? They are old!” Of course, my mother didn’t miss a beat. She shot right back at me – “it’s a plate, and it still works, there is no need to buy another one.” I wanted to throw it out simply because in my mind, it was old and it was cheap. Do you see how this idea of longing for more – to get the next best thing, the latest technology, a “newer” version, an updated model – can haunt us all? I would have had my mom throw out all those old plastic plates and gone to Ikea to get new plastic ones!

The farmer in Jesus parable was living in excess. He was trying to hoard his crops; storing them up instead of sharing his wealth with others. But it is as simple as what Jesus said to the people, “Life does not exist in the abundance of possessions.”

What then is the answer? If we don’t live from the scarcity mentality, devouring each other in competition, and hoarding to excess, then how do we live? Jesus shows us what Kingdom living really is in the very next scripture in Luke. He offers us an alternative to the insatiable ache of want, at the end of Luke 12:

Luke 12:31-40 (NRSV)

³¹ Instead, strive for God’s kingdom, and these things will be given to you as well.

³²“Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom. ³³ Sell your possessions, and give alms. Make purses for yourselves that do not wear out, an unfailing treasure in heaven, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys. ³⁴ For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

³⁵“Be dressed for action and have your lamps lit; ³⁶ be like those who are waiting for their master to return from the wedding banquet, so that they may open the door for him as soon as he comes and knocks. ³⁷ Blessed are those slaves whom the master finds alert when he comes; truly I tell you, he will fasten his belt and have them sit down to eat, and he will come and serve them. ³⁸ If he comes during the middle of the night, or near dawn, and finds them so, blessed are those slaves.

³⁹“But know this: if the owner of the house had known at what hour the thief was coming, he would not have let his house be broken into. ⁴⁰ You also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.”

Jesus shows us the alternative to living with a greedy heart. In striving for God’s Kingdom, Jesus gives us the key to living faithfully. First, we are to be generous. Jesus calls us to give alms, which is a way of saving, “give to those less fortunate than you”. He calls us to think about someone other than ourselves. Having a generous nature is the exact opposite of the scarcity mindset. Giving generously to others helps us to learn that there is enough for everyone; generosity builds up Kingdom living. Generosity leads to the feeling of abundance.

So secondly, Jesus calls us to live with abundance. When we live with an abundant spirit we believe that there is enough for everyone, that God’s provisions are plentiful, and that we can live open handedly. When Jesus teaches us to “make purses that do not wear out” he is calling us to hold onto our money loosely; to think of how much we give in addition to how much we get. A hoarder’s purse will wear out quickly from being overstuffed, but someone who gives as much as they receive will always have a light purse. And ultimately, believing in abundance will bring our hearts to a point where they will be filled with gratitude.

Having a grateful heart is the key to the third part of how Jesus calls us to live. We are called in this scripture to be mindful, to be on constant watch. To be ready. I think the key to being mindful of God’s blessings is to go through each day with a spirit of gratitude. It is like a cycle. When we are grateful, we are more likely to be generous to others. When we are generous to others, we are more likely to live from abundance (and not scarcity). And when we live in abundance we are more grateful and therefore more mindful of God’s blessings in our lives. In this cycle, we are drawn into the Kingdom living that Jesus intends for us.

Let me give you just one example of what I believe Jesus means when he challenges us to live generously as opposed to living with a greedy heart: Two years ago, I led our high school mission trip to inner city Chicago. We ended up at the Greater Chicago Food Depository, where we packaged 7 acres of freshly picked corn that a farmer in Illinois had donated; because he didn't have the resources to store it himself (his harvest had been too plentiful). The Greater Chicago Food Depository distributes 69 million pounds of food each year to the homeless, needy, elderly, and children in the Chicago area. They are run primarily by volunteer support; and they have a commitment to making sure at least 40% of their products are fresh produce. So here I was, in this warehouse that is the size of 6 football fields, run by mostly volunteers, trying to pack up 7 acres of corn. And I had this moment where I feel like God was convicting my heart; I got this overwhelming feeling that there really truly is enough food to feed everyone in the world. *There really is.* The problem is in the distribution. (And here is the radical part: feel free to call me a wacko to my face after the service.) As I stood there in this warehouse filled with food, I got this sick feeling in my stomach as I thought that perhaps there is something wrong – maybe even something evil – with the fact that our distribution of food and clean water is a “for-profit” system. I began to question the ethicalness of a “for-profit” food supply chain because I saw a different way that day – a system of generosity – where feeding others was valued more than making a profit.

And it made me really question the greediness in our whole food supply distribution system. While I was at GCFD, I learned that there was a neighboring Goya Plant that had come and learned what GCFD was doing, and the Goya plant leadership had decided to take 15% of everything that comes out of their local plant, and donate it straight to the Greater Chicago Food Depository. The leadership of this company decided to choose generosity over greed; and feels that in doing so, it contributes to a culture of abundance within the company. And Goya still turns a profit, even with 15% of their cans going straight to GCFD. This experience at Greater Chicago Food Depository -- hearing the story of the farmer and his seven acres of corn, and knowing that Goya wants to foster a generous spirit within their company – it made me think deeply about the global implications of the scarcity mentality and living with abundance. I have made some changes in my life because of that experience. Not anything radical like selling my possessions (although I am in seminary, so that wouldn't be much of a garage sale!), but I have made some changes in the way I purchase and consume food. I am wary of companies and systems that play into the zero sum game. I have learned to not to buy into that scarcity mentality that so much of the world fosters. I know we can't change the entire world with just my one story about a corn farmer, but stay tuned, because next week, I just may tell you we can change the world. But for today, we can change one thing: our own hearts.

Jesus lays it out pretty simple and clear. To get ready for the Kingdom the question is this: do you have a greedy heart or do you have a generous heart? Are you consumed with the getting, or are you mindful of the giving? Do you want to spend your time building a bigger barn to hold your stuff? Or do you want to spend your time grateful for God's abundance? Will

you be consumed with longing, the ache of wanting more? Or will you put your real treasures somewhere else?

Will you get trapped in the cycle of scarcity-competition-excess-hoarding? Jesus warns that this leads to death. Whether you make \$2000 a year, or \$200,000 or \$2 million, Jesus calls us to be givers. If we are to get ready for the Kingdom that is coming, we will only do so by living with a generous spirit, by practicing abundant living, and by cultivating a mindfulness of God's blessings. Get your heart ready: Be drawn into the cycle of generosity-abundance-gratitude-mindfulness that fosters the ideals of the Kingdom of God. May it be so. Amen.