THE STRETCHING HYPHEN

Luke 12:13-21

The Tenth Sunday after Pentecost

The Seven Deadly Sins have been with us as long as humanity has breathed breath. The Seven Deadly Sins are lust, gluttony, greed, sloth, wrath, envy, and pride. During the 6th Century Pope Gregory the Great gave them special recognition by declaring them to be capital or mortal sins instead of minor sins which could be forgiven through any sacrament of the church. In contrast to simple forgiveness for minor sins, the Seven Deadly Sins had the power to destroy the life of grace, created the threat of eternal damnation, and required absolution through the sacrament of confession.

Our text for the day from Luke's gospel is a teaching of Jesus on one of those seven deadly sins. As we see the larger text we see Jesus teaching the disciples while a rather large unruly crowd gathered. The unruly nature of the crowd is identified back in the first verse of the 12th chapter as the Word speaks of people trampling on one another. The second indicator of the unruly nature of the crowd appears in the first verse of our text for the day as it says,

> Someone in the crowd said to him, "Teacher,
> Tell my brother to divide the family inheritance
> with me.

In a moment of teaching His disciples, someone interrupts. Someone ignores what Jesus is doing and brings his own personal agenda on center stage. In essence what the man in the crowd did was to say, "Hey, Jesus, hush up a minute with that stuff about forgiveness and the Holy Spirit and help me get what's mine."

I remember an interruption in church my third Sunday at Vidalia. The Choir had just finished a stirring rendition of "The Battle Hymn of The Republic" when it happened. I was standing up to preach when I noticed someone coming down the side aisle toward the front. It appeared that he was coming to the altar even before I started preaching. I moved down from the pulpit toward the altar to meet him. But, he was not coming to kneel, but to ask his new preacher a question. About ten feet from the altar, he spoke with a voice loud enough for all to hear. "Now preacher, we know that was the fight song for them Yankees in the War of Northern Aggression, so when is the Choir going to sing "Dixie?" I was not prepared, but the ushers were and they quickly escorted this more than slightly intoxicated worshipper who was interrupting worship to a pew toward the back where they could sit with him.

But, this man who interrupted Jesus' teaching seemed driven not by alcohol, but by greed. This becomes obvious as we listen to Jesus' response to him.

> Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds
> of greed; for one's life does not consist in the
> abundance of things. (12:15)

The man who interrupted Jesus was a younger brother. Upon his father's death, the older brother who received two-thirds of the inheritance had executor like responsibilities. Apparently, he refused to divide with his younger brother and apparently he was present since the younger brother says to Jesus, "Tell my brother to give me what is mine." It is clear that Jesus sees the greed of both brothers, one who was keeping what did not belong to him and the other, who was so selfishly eager to get what was his that he put his needs above the needs of all others.

In response to the younger brother's selfish greed, Jesus told a parable about a man of affluence who found that even greater prosperity was being poured upon his life. Hear two things in the parable. Hear the lack of gratitude. Hear the number of times the personal pronoun "I" appears.

> The land of a rich man produced abundantly.
> And he thought to himself, "What should I do,
> for I have no place to store my crops?" 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. And I will
> say to my soul, 'Soul, you have ample goods
> laid up for many years; eat, drink, be merry.'"

The parable reveals a man who took credit for his land producing. It reveals a man who is empty of gratitude. It reveals a man who is filled with pride. It reveals a man who thinks he has done it all. It reveals a man who is thinking only about himself. It reveals a man who thinks his wealth puts him in the place of control over his life. It reveals a man who is thought of by God as a fool.

Greed is not just about getting more money. The ugly thing about greed is what it makes of us. The Word of God tells us our purpose in life is to give glory to God and to serve Him. We live as if it is to get more and to accumulate more. We are much more attentive to receiving the physical blessings of economic prosperity than we are receiving the spiritual blessings God desires to give to us. We would never think of ourselves as being greedy; yet, we are never really satisfied. We are always looking for what is bigger, what is better, and what causes others to have a higher regard for us. We end up giving small gifts to God, not because we have small incomes, but because we desire so much for ourselves. Greed causes us to look for the minimum we can give to God and it never gives us the opportunity to put God to the test to see if He really will provide for us as the Word says He will.

Greed causes us to live as if "taking it with us is an option." This is the final flaw exposed about the rich man in the parable. He lived as if he was going to live forever. He lived as if he could take it with him. Of course, nothing is farther from the truth. We will leave this world with the same amount we had upon our entrance. While we are here we may construct massive million dollar monuments to our importance. When we are gone the monument will be only a few feet wide. We will leave this world as dependent

upon others as we were when we first arrived. It is what we do between the two points that matters. Many gravestones will record the name of the buried and then is inscribed the date of birth, a hyphen, and the date of death. The most important part of the inscription is the hyphen.

If getting more and accumulating more had been the driving force, we would never have heard the stories of folks the Apostle Paul, John Wesley, Mother Teresa, some high school teacher who stuck with it for forty years for the love of kids, some single Mom who is determined to see her children have enough, or maybe your grandfather, or your mother. I wonder about the story we are writing while the hyphen is slowly stretching toward its maximum length. If getting more and accumulating more has been the driving force, it may not even be a story worth repeating.

Do not make the mistake of the guy who interrupted Jesus' moment of teaching. Do not be like the man called a "fool" in the parable. Instead, remember,

> Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. (Matthew 6:19-21)

If those were my words, I would advise you to take them with a grain of salt. But, they are not my words. They are God's Words, so I would advise us both to take them seriously, lest we hear God saying to us, "You fool!" instead of "Well done." (Matthew 25:21).

This sermon preached by the Rev. Bill Strickland at the Richmond Hill United Methodist Church in Richmond Hill, Georgia on August 5, 2007.