

*“...greed, for lack of a better word, is good.”*

As I hope you know, this line is not original to me. I am not making a counter-point to our Lord’s warning in today’s gospel. As I bet some of you remember, I am quoting a well-known line from a famous movie of the late 1980’s. Does anyone know it? *Wall Street*. Michael Douglas won an Oscar for his portrayal of Gordon Gecko who said that line as part of a tribute to the power of greed to help the world evolve. He went on to say: “Greed is right, greed works. Greed clarifies, cuts through, and captures the essence of the evolutionary spirit.” In many ways, this movie set the tone for a generation and continues to describe our world today.

But is Gordon Gecko right? What do you think? I know for me, I wrestled and danced with this idea in the 1980’s and 1990’s as I went to business school and moved through my corporate career. Before *Wall Street* hit the theaters, I had read *Freedom to Choose* by Milton Friedman. In this book, I learned “There’s no such thing as a free lunch.” I bet some of you read it or at least heard about it, too. Friedman was the intellectual leader of what became known as “the Chicago school of economics” and he won a Nobel Prize for Economics based on his research and writing about monetary theory and the power of the market.

But is Milton Friedman right? He describes a world that is best left to invisible market forces that flow together to make things turn out for the best. Does that dynamic represent a law, like gravity or natural selection? That is way beyond my capacity to answer—I just have one graduate level course in Economics (I got a B+, I think). For the purpose of this sermon, we can set that question aside and look at other issues that we do need to consider as followers of Jesus. Because whatever the truth of market forces, there is more to life.

Jesus talked about that “more to life” reality in the gospel we just heard. And what our Lord says is inarguable—no matter how wise our business acumen, it can only take us so far. The reason is simple—we all are going to die. No matter how well we manage our lives, whether in business or some other area, we are mortal. As conscious, self-aware beings, we all know that truth, no matter how much we try to distract ourselves.

Jesus understood that. It came into focus in today’s gospel when a man came up to Jesus and asked him to mediate an inheritance dispute he had with his brother. Jesus responded to him and his listeners, “Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed...” Then Jesus told a story about life and death and greed to bring the point home to his audience.

Like all good stories that Jesus told, we can relate to the central character. He seems like a good guy. He has worked hard and had success, so much that he is debating what he should do next.

In the story, what the man is considering is not unwise. It is what any farmer or business person would examine in order to be a good steward. That by itself is not the problem. I hope I am not saying that because we just went through a capital campaign and a building expansion. I hate when the gospel hits close to home! Lord, have mercy.

Here is what I believe the point of the story is—that the man did an incomplete review of the facts of his life and the reality of his world before he made his decision to build larger barns and store his excess grains and goods. His decision made plenty of sense on the superficial plane of life. That plane involves personal possessions and being sure I have enough. It is captured on the bumper sticker, I think also from the 1980's, "He who dies with the most toys wins." The problem, as we heard in the reading from Ecclesiastes today, is that it is not true. He who dies with the most toys just dies like all the rest of us.

So that is the bad news, I guess. What is the good news? Jesus gives us a clue—his alternative to the philosophy grounded in greed is to be "rich toward God." Gordon Gecko or even Milton Friedman would probably make a "harrumph" sound if they heard this and then laugh and dismiss this point of view as hopelessly idealistic. So if we think Gecko has a point and Friedman was a brilliant economist, what do we do? How do we respond? Do we take seriously our Lord's perspective? Our response matters. Because we will all die one day.

It does not have to be totally either/or. We can respect markets and understand and follow those principles without ever letting them define and ultimately control our souls. We must see beyond and above the market. We must make our decisions based on what we know. But unlike the man in the gospel story, we need to bring into focus *all* that we know.

There are at least two other considerations that we all know. First, is the fact we will all die one day; and second, that there are people who matter in life beyond me and my immediate family. If we keep these two additional facts in mind as we make our important decisions in life, we will more likely be "rich toward God."

Stephen Covey used a simple exercise that he recommended in his bestselling book, *First Things First*. He suggested that we imagine someone giving the eulogy at our funeral. What would we want that person to say about us? That question helps us identify what our higher, truer values are. Listen to the eulogies of people we admire. We have had the chance to do that here over the past several months—people that we love and respect like Bruce Cross, Harold Gill, Ralph Davis, and Marilyn Goeltz.

Certain themes stand out from their lives—their kindness, integrity, and genuine care for other people. They took their work seriously and did it well—but they did it while always keeping in mind those other important values of kindness, integrity, and genuine caring. One more good eulogy detail to aim for—have fun. Life is about more than business.

Now as morbid as thinking about our funeral may be, it can also help us find and follow the path that makes us rich toward God. That path is not about the next big venture in our business. It is not about expanding our church building. It is about whether or not we do those things—or anything we do—by following the way of Jesus. That means we love people, all people, even those who are not always loveable. It means we love people, even if they cannot help us in some tangible way. It is also remembering that possessions are simply tools for life—helping us to learn more, help others, and enjoy life. Possessions are not to be used as measuring sticks to determine whether we are a success or not.

If we remember these things, we will know that life is not just about me and mine. It is fine to want to do well and provide for our family—that is honorable. But it is not enough. There are so many people in the world that face challenges that make their lives so hard. Some of us have faced these types of challenges, too, and we overcame them. We did not overcome them by ourselves, though—we overcame them through a combination of our personal hard work and the hard work of others. Helpers like our family, teachers, coaches, mentors, employers, and others who took time to help us flourish in our lives. To be rich toward God means we understand that and follow their example as we reach out to help others.

No, greed is not good. It is a competing value, an alternate worldview, different from what our Lord taught. This is not to dismiss or demonize business. I worked in business for twenty-four years. It is possible to work in business and follow the path of our Lord—we need people to do both. We need business people and other leaders in this world who point to another world. So when we do leave this world, people will say, “That person was rich toward God.” Amen.