

I want to get to the parable in today’s reading, but, first, I want to spend a moment with the conversation that precedes it. There was a crowd surrounding Jesus. Someone came to him and said, “Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me.”

Now, let me ask you something. If you were to meet Jesus face-to-face, what would you say to him? If you had a chance to meet Jesus, in person, what would you ask him about? Eternal life? World peace? The secret to happiness? If you could ask Jesus for one thing, what would it be?

Here’s a man who has an encounter with Jesus Christ, the Savior of the world, the “hinge of history,” God in the flesh, and what does he have to say? Tell my brother to give me my money. It kind of seems like a lost opportunity. He stood in the presence of the Son of God and the number one thing on his mind was his inheritance.

Jesus refused the request. He had no interest in being the mediator between this man and his brother. That was not his purpose on this earth. Then, Jesus said, “Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.”

Greed is “the excessive desire to acquire or possess more than one needs to the detriment of others.” My favorite embodiment of greed was fictional character Ebenezer Scrooge. The narrator in Dickens’ A Christmas Carol described him as “a tightfisted hand at the grindstone...a squeezing, wrenching, grasping, scraping, clutching, covetous old sinner!” I think we get the picture.

I know you probably didn’t wake up this morning hoping to hear about greed. I don’t think most of us are particularly greedy people. I don’t think we have any Ebenezer Scrooges among us. But I do think there is danger to greed creeping into our lives, effecting our thinking and decision making.

Around the year 600, Pope Gregory identified greed as one of the Seven Deadly Sins. That means it’s a sin that leads to other sins. To have an “excessive desire to acquire and possess” can lead to lying, cheating, and stealing. Someone once wrote, “fraud is the daughter of greed.”

Greed can harm family relationships, as is the case with the brothers in our reading today. It often comes with stress, exhaustion, anxiety, depression, and despair. But the

worst thing about greed is how it affects our relationship with God. Jesus said it in the Sermon on the Mount. You can't serve two masters.

If accumulation of possessions is one's ultimate concern, that becomes God for us. Therefore, the number one obstacle to our relationship with God is our relationship with money. We see it in the reading today. The man had an encounter with Jesus Christ and all he could think about was his inheritance. He missed the moment.

Jesus emphasizes the point with a parable. The land of a rich man produced abundantly. His barns were full. He had nowhere left to store anything. The situation was that he was already wealthy. Then, he had more produce than he knew what to do with.

He had to decide what to do with all this extra produce. He could have donated it. He could have distributed it to the needy. He could have held a banquet and fed the whole community. Instead, he decided to tear down his old barns and build bigger barns. "And I will say to my soul, 'Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.'"

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?" God said, "So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God."

I think the mistake he made was thinking that success consisted in accumulating possessions. What good will all his possessions do him when he dies? There's no mention of God or other people in the story. It's all about "I." He should have cultivated a relationship with God. He should have spent his life loving God and loving neighbor.

That's what Ebenezer Scrooge learned. When visited by the ghost of Jacob Marley, Scrooge said, "You were always a good man of business." To which Jacob Marley replied, "Business! Humankind was my business."

There is nothing in our tradition that suggests money itself is bad or that saving and investing for the future is wrong. In fact, in 1789, the great preacher and religious leader, John Wesley, preached a sermon entitled, "The Use of Money." There were three basic points to the sermon.

The first was to earn all you can. Go out and work hard. Make as much money as you possibly can. There's nothing wrong with that. It's the faithful thing to do.

The second part of the sermon was to save all you can. Don't waste your money on frivolous things. Don't gamble it away. Don't throw it away on riotous living. Save as much money as you possibly can. That way you'll be prepared if you ever need it. If God puts it on your heart to contribute to a particular cause, you'll be ready.

The third part of Wesley's sermon was to give all you can. Back in 1789, he thought his listeners were doing really well with earning all they can and saving all they can. It was in the giving all they can where he felt they were falling short. He believed his church could change the world if folks took their giving more seriously.

The man in the parable did really well with earning all he could. He excelled at saving all he could. He fell short when it came to giving all he could. I think that could be the key to guarding against all kinds of greed. It might mean making generosity as important as earning and saving. It's to make giving as high a priority as anything else we do with our resources.

In my work, I've spent time with a number of people toward the end of their lives. I've never heard anyone say, "I wish I hadn't given away so much. I wish I had kept more for myself." I've never heard anyone say, "I regret giving away my extra stuff. I wish I kept it and piled it into a storage unit." I've never heard anyone say, "I wish I volunteered less at a school or at the church." I never heard anyone say, "I wish I kept my artistic or leadership talents to myself."

My message is to make all you can. Save as much as you can. And be generous. Be just as diligent in giving all you can. In the end, everything we accumulate won't help us. Last week, Rev. Pat shared a story with me. Apparently, when shipping tycoon Aristotle Onassis died, somebody asked, "How much did he leave behind?" Someone responded, "All of it!"

In a previous congregation I served, there was a woman who grew up in Czechoslovakia. She was very young when the communists invaded the country. She described to me how her parents desperately wanted to escape and bring the family to America.

The problem was there were so many people trying to flee, it was difficult to find a way out. In fact, her parents associated the Raggedy Ann doll with America. They thought if they dressed up their daughters to look like Raggedy Ann, it would give them a better chance of getting to the U.S.

They had more than enough money to escape the country, but all the money in the world couldn't buy them seats on a plane. However, it turned out that her father had done some work with the US ambassador to Czechoslovakia. So, he called the ambassador. The ambassador told her father that if they could get to the embassy, he would get them on a plane, even if it was on his own plane. That's how they got out of the country.

After sharing the story with me, she said, "The lesson I learned in that whole adventure was this. It's not what you have that matters most; it's who you know. I think

that might be the lesson Jesus tried to impart to the man asking about his inheritance. When it comes to the state of our souls, it's not what we have; it's who we know. It's not about storing up treasures for oneself. It's about being rich toward God.