

Gracious God, open our ears that we may hear your truth, open our eyes that we may see your kingdom, and open our hearts and minds that we might know the cries of our brothers and sisters who are hungry, and hurting, and sometimes even dying without the knowledge of your love for them. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts together be pleasing in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

George Carlin had a routine about “stuff.” He talked about how we love our stuff, how we accumulate and hoard our stuff, and how we want more stuff - even coveting the stuff that our neighbors have. It’s true that we live in a material world. For too many of us, keeping up with the Joneses is part of the problem that we have in our American society today... anyone remember the commercial a few years back where the guy is riding his lawnmower and talking about all of the stuff that he has? The commercial ends with him staring wide-eyed into the camera with a goofy grin on his face as he declares, “and I’m in debt up to my eyeballs.”

The question this morning is this, do we possess our possessions, or do our possessions possess us?

It’s a question that is appropriate for us today as our consumerist culture has driven us into the highest amount of debt in our history... both as a nation and as individuals. The income inequality of today, the difference between the haves and the have nots, is greater than it was in the days of the “golden age” of America in the 1870’s-1900. A period of inequality so bad that it birthed progressives who were dedicated to evening the playing field between all Americans led by a trust buster named Theodore Roosevelt who believed that the “American Dream” should be available to all, not just to those who were born with a silver spoon in their mouth.

I contend that the consumerist culture of our day is antithetical to the Gospel and to the lived experience of the early church. Early in the Acts of the Apostles, we hear that the church was known for its people living in community, sharing what they had with one another so that no one went without food, shelter, and clothing. Everyone helped everyone else and they all worked together for the common good. We see this attitude of sharing extolled in Acts 4:32-37. Yet, early on, there were examples of others in the community who would take advantage for themselves by withholding their abundance from the others. In Acts 5, we hear of Ananias and Sapphira who withheld what they were supposed to be sharing from the community. When questioned about their deceit, they lied, and they both immediately dropped dead for their lies. The community was idealistic, and I contend that this type of community where everything was shared by everyone is a model that should have survived, but it didn't... and that failure to survive by overcoming our natural hoarding tendencies is part of our problem today.

In our Gospel lesson, Jesus is confronted by a man who is consumed by greed. The man wants Jesus to step into the conflict between him and his brother over their inheritance from their father's estate. But Jesus will have none of it. After refusing to get involved with the conflict, Jesus tells him, "Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions." Just on the basis of that statement, I doubt that Jesus would be welcomed in too many corporation boardrooms... or even some of our churches for that matter.

The problem that Jesus is addressing here is greed. And it seems that greed is part and parcel of the human condition. We want what we can get and we want to be in control. And both of those things, greed and control, stand in the way of our relationship with God.

Jesus continues his reply to the man by telling what is called the parable of the rich fool. The rich fool is a farmer whose lands produce an overabundance of crops. Instead of sharing this abundance with the community, he decides to tear down his existing barns and build bigger ones to accommodate the abundance. As he does so, he celebrates by taking on the attitude that he should eat, drink and be merry. However, in the midst of his celebratory mood, he hears from God who tells him, “You fool! Tonight you will die. Now who will get the things that you have prepared for yourself? This is the way it will be for those who hoard things for themselves and aren’t rich toward God” (Luke 12:20-21, CEB).

It seems to me that the real question is whether we possess our possessions or if our possessions possess us? The relentless pursuit of “stuff” so that we can be better than our neighbor accomplishes what, exactly? It doesn’t bring happiness, or if it does, that happiness is fleeting because we continually want more. And the desire to want more and more stuff leads to a never ending cycle that even depresses a man like Ebenezer Scrooge. Remember how Scrooge was a lonely, bitter, old fool who let his pursuit of “stuff” become the sum total of who he was? At least until he saw the error of his ways and through his generosity became fully alive, fully loved, and fully human again?

I find it fascinating that Jesus follows this story of the rich fool by reminding all of his listeners that when you trust in God, you have nothing to worry about. When everyone lives into God’s embrace, trusting in God for his abundance, then the problems of this world will be diminished. When everyone of Christ’s followers are “rich toward God” sharing that they have, then hunger and thirst will be eliminated and nobody will go without the essentials of life, namely food, clothing, and shelter.

You know, it is an undisputed fact that we don't have a resource problem in this world. There is enough food produced in the United States alone to feed ourselves and the people of the poorest nations of Africa without needing help from anyone else. Our daily food waste in this country could provide sustenance for millions of people.

But sharing resources is not in our nature. Just look at the water wars between Georgia, Alabama, and Florida... and I won't even comment on the perennial drive from Georgia to put a straw into the Tennessee River. And the water wars are all because Atlanta's thirst cannot be quenched. Well, it can be quenched through solutions like desalination plants that turn salt water from the Atlantic Ocean into fresh water for drinking, washing, and sustaining life while providing fresh water to their neighbors in Alabama and Florida through the Chattahoochee watershed.

Greed is in our nature. Our sin nature. And that sin nature prevents us from fully becoming the humans that God created us to be. Whenever we allow our possessions to stand between us and God, we diminish ourselves and we fail to reach our full potential.

John Lennon wrote about this in the 3rd verse of his best selling song, *Imagine*:

Imagine no possessions
I wonder if you can
No need for greed or hunger
A brotherhood of man
Imagine all the people sharing all the world...
You may say I'm a dreamer
But I'm not the only one
I hope someday you'll join us
And the world will be as one
With God's help, may we make it so. Amen.