

Proper 13 - 10 Pentecost – Year C – August 4, 2010 - Homily
Hosea 11:1-11; Psalm 107:1-9, 43; Colossians 3:1-11; Luke 12:13-21
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As the story goes, the president of a local bank has two sons. They're rather like the reverse of the prodigal son and his brother. The elder son is a fun-loving rake, and the younger son is serious, dutiful and responsible. When their father dies, they find themselves at the funeral parlor looking at each other across the casket. "You and I both know that money meant more to our father than anything else," says the older son. "I think the most appropriate way for us to say goodbye to him would be to put a thousand dollars in each of his hands and let it be buried with him. What better tribute could we pay him?" he says. "Of course," replies the younger son. Predictably, the younger brother immediately goes to the bank and returns with ten crisp one hundred dollar bills. He folds the bills carefully into his father's dead hand. Later that evening, when no one else is around the older brother returns, removes the cash and replaces it with a check for two thousand dollars. There's a lot to think about in this story alone. Disloyalty and betrayal on the part of one of the brothers? Perhaps. Creative rationalization in fulfilling an obligation? Maybe. The idea that money is a tool for the living and is pointless to the dead is also a possibility. Then there is plain, unadulterated greed.

In Paul's letter to the Colossians we hear again Paul's exhortation on the connection between our baptism and our new lives in Christ. What we can be sure of in coming to Christ in faith, is that being transformed by the gift of the Holy Spirit is a lifelong journey, and not without our own forms of resistance. On becoming a disciple of Jesus, we don't immediately switch off the kind of vices that Paul mentions, which are incidentally an illustrative list rather than an exhaustive one. We cannot instantly pick up all the virtues that Paul lists either, as if we were tidying our house. The gradual process of coming to know life – real life in Christ – inevitably takes time and commitment. Participating fully in the Christian life of a community of faith helps us along. Committing ourselves to worship, prayer and study of God's word facilitates the process considerably. Eventually, by the power of the Holy Spirit we simply begin to see things differently and to live differently. Yet it serves us well, from time-to-time to be reminded of where we were, in order to see how far we have come, and how we too may have slipped into creative rationalization when it comes to being honest about our failings.

This evening I want to focus on greed, what Paul brackets in the reading as idolatry. Greed is one of the seven deadly sins. There has been much written on the seven deadly sins versus the seven virtues. There is no doubt that greed is one of the most insidious of vices. It has even been considered as the root of all seven major vices. Thomas Aquinas describes greed as "a sin against God, ... inasmuch as [it means we are condemning or setting aside] things eternal for the sake of temporal things." Greed is not just about craving, accumulating and coveting money or material possessions; it's an inordinate self-serving desire for those things that our culture has determined bestow status, privilege and power on their owners. That's why Paul brackets greed with idolatry. Anything in our lives that we place ahead of desiring God in Christ Jesus is essentially an idol. Unfortunately, greed can manifest itself in sneaky ways. For example, greed can easily disguise itself as what we might otherwise consider to be prudent planning. Remember the rich fool in Jesus' parable from Luke's Gospel?

Greed always has destructive consequences in our personal lives, in our relationships, and in our communities. It may be summer, but Dickens' classic tale, *A Christmas Carol*, immediately

springs to mind when we think of greed for money. Ebenezer Scrooge epitomizes this form of idolatry and its consequences. His lack of kindness and compassion, charity or benevolence has already made him a lonely man, and has also impacted those who work for him. What the ghostly visitors impress upon Scrooge is that the blessing of riches comes with the responsibility to help those in his community. Greed has long been at the center of terrible oppression and exploitation of others. Fortunately, with the advent of social justice awareness, we can now make better purchasing choices, like buying fair trade coffee, and so on. We can speak out and demand reforms to stop human trafficking like the rampant sex slave industry, which has flourished by greedy demand and exploitation mostly of children and young women. Greed lurks behind the vice of lust – a greed for physical pleasure at all costs and without regard to those who are hurt in the process.

If that is not enough, when we reflect on the destructiveness of greed, we realize that greed also builds barriers that God never intended us to build. Greed deceives us into thinking we are better than others, because of what we own or what we can buy, or in all manner of other ways. At the end of this passage from Paul's letter to the Colossians, we read that in clothing ourselves with Christ, all pretences must drop away, including the notion that any one of us is better than our neighbor. "There is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free; but Christ is all and in all!" Notice the piece about barbarians and Scythians. That doesn't mean a whole lot in our day and age, but if we translate it into modern language we can readily see that God is calling us to a serious consideration of who we consider less than civilized, and who we consider our enemies. The good news is that there is an antidote to all forms of greed. It flows out of loving God in Christ Jesus and living with generous hearts. It is a part of who we are in this community as we practice God's graciousness. Generosity also embraces a life of gratitude, giving thanks for all our blessings, and holding all things lightly as stewards of God's gifts. We couldn't have had a better set of readings for this week, as we are working on the rummage sale. What a great blessing it is to be able to give things, to sell them at a price that really helps others in the broader community, and then to use the money raised to help even more people through our outreach ministries. God is good, and living generously creates joy in life.

Amen.