

The Rev. Dean Lindsey

March 8, 2009

Second Sermon in the Series on Eight Bad Thoughts:

Coveting

Enough for Everyone

Second Sunday in Lent

Acts 4:32-37; Acts 5:1-11

I've got to tell you that the hardest part about preparing this sermon has been figuring out where to begin. As promised, our topic this week is one of the Eight Bad Thoughts which diminishes our life with one another and with God. As described by the fourth century monastic Evagrius Pontus, today's bad thought goes by many names: greed, avarice, love of money, materialism, and it is specifically identified by the tenth commandment as covetousness. My problem with knowing where to begin is that we live in a world filled with greed. It is all around us, pervading what we experience in each day, and it is within us, filling our thoughts, if we allow it to.

I don't know exactly how to begin, but I do know where I want to end. You see, in classical ethics, vices are seen as a defective form of particular virtues. The virtue in this case is generosity. That is where I want to end up, with a vision of life lived generously, filled not with a love of money and things but with a love of God

and neighbor. That is precisely the picture which Luke gives to us of life within the early Jerusalem church, where possessions are shared for the common good.

There have long been skeptics of this passage. Maybe Luke was looking through rose-colored glasses, they speculate. Maybe this ideal was lived out only for a relatively short period of time. I once was in a regular Bible study with a friend who was a successful businessman and a committed capitalist. This passage from Acts drove him nuts. He couldn't believe it was in the Bible!

“Sharing goods doesn't work,” he would thunder. “From each according to their ability to each according to their needs: that is communism, not Christianity.”

And I would say to him, “Tell me, how do things work at your house, and with your children? Does everyone get to eat what they need to eat, or do some members of the family get less, because they haven't contributed as much? Does everyone have a bed regardless of whether they worked for it or paid for it?”

“Of course they do!” he would reply.

Then, I would say, “Well, it sounds to me like you are running your household according to a communistic, or at least a communalistic ideal, and” I would add, “a Christian ideal, too.”

That would drive him even more crazy.

The New Testament does not prescribe a particular economic pattern for society as a whole. But it does offer a pattern for the church which stresses mutual

support and concern. Fortunately, most of us do experience that pattern within our families where relationship is stressed over things, staying together is the focus rather than getting ahead.

A striking story that illustrates this pattern is worth re-telling. A family of missionaries was expelled from China when the Communists came to power. A soldier arrived at their door way and told them that they would have to leave the next morning at 8:00 a.m., and they could only bring 200 pounds with them. The husband and wife spent the night carefully weighing out their possessions. Should they carry books or furnishings, a typewriter or extra food and clothes for the journey? Finally, they stacked the chosen items by the door and were set to depart. When the soldier returned, he asked them if they were ready, and eyeing the pile of bags asked if they had weighed everything out.

“Are you carrying only 200 pounds?”

“Yes,” the parents responded.

“And the children,” the soldier asked, “did you weigh them?”

And with that all of the precious items became like dust. Completely worthless. They left them all behind.

Hopefully, we all come from families that would do the same for us. Sadly, I know of a few that might not, but those, I daresay, would be the exception rather than the rule. Still, the New Testament asks us to expand our definition of family.

In the Book of Acts it includes not just the nuclear family, or the household, but the community of faith. Inspired by the Holy Spirit and united by love for one another and their Risen Lord, they adopt the practices of mutual support and the sharing of what they have for the benefit of all.

The Jerusalem church is not simply made up of poor people, widows, and orphans. The stories we have read this morning describe people of means. After all, in the ancient world, land was the greatest store of wealth. Land is what Barnabas and Ananias have to sell. They are people of privilege. The question is how they use their privilege.

And that is a question for many of us here. How will we use our privilege?

Last Tuesday, Deb Helms and I began leading a discussion on the book *The Price of Privilege* by Madeleine Levine. We had a very good turn out, and a number of the parents who met with us shared a common desire for their children to be healthy and balanced in their lives, with gratitude for what they have and empathy towards those who have less. But, we all know that can be a challenge. When children or adults have many advantages, it is so easy to become plagued with a sense of entitlement; to find little contentment in what we do have, and to yearn simply for more. Did you know that the average American child receives 70 new toys every year? What kind of lessons are they learning in the midst of such

over-abundance? How will those lessons now change in a different economic climate?

In her book, Madeleine Levine cites numerous studies from the psychological literature about America's children and youth. It is distressing to learn that many of the pathologies of adolescence—drug use, depression, and the like—occur with the highest frequency not among poor children, or middle class children, but among the affluent. Levine herself offers some hypotheses for why this is so: children in wealthy settings are often emotionally isolated from their parents while also facing high demands for achievement. They are pushed to excel, with schedules more tightly packed than the CEO of a large company, with little thought given to their emotional and spiritual nurture.

It is that kind of nurture that allows us to grow into maturity and which teaches us how to use one of the most important words in the English language: enough. “I have enough.”

I have enough money. I have enough things in my life. I have enough security. I have enough, and I do not need to yearn for more. I do not need to spend my time and energy trying to earn more. I do not need to step over those around me as I reach for more.

More is the word that seems stuck in our mouths: I want more. It has brought us to an unfortunate impasse in our country. We are seeing the ravages of always wanting more, when enough was not good enough.

Acquisitiveness and greed always leave damage in their wake. The flip side of someone having too much is that someone else has too little. It's a connection that is hard for us to grasp, because we do not see the effects of our own spending and consumption. We do not see the people who make the shoes we wear or the food we eat. We know nothing of their lives or their struggles. The child who labors in the field picking fruit. The young woman who can barely care for her own family while she does piece work to produce our clothing. It is so hard for us to imagine, but when we have too much, someone else goes without.

That is what makes the actions of Barnabas so heartening. He is aware of his abundance, and desires to share it, creating enough for everyone. In essence, he says, "I have enough," and that means others will, too.

That is what is so destructive about the actions of Ananias and Saphira. They do not want the others to know what they possess. For love of money, they sacrifice the honest and fruitful relations within the community of faith. They say in essence, "we do not have enough," and it is a lie which they choke on. It kills them, literally.

Some years ago, I was leading a large adult Sunday School class which was looking at the question of the unraveling of social bonds which seemed to unite an earlier generation, the selfish individualism which separates people, and the erosion of institutions such as churches and service organizations in contemporary society. Some of the oldest members of the group were complaining loudly about how much things had changed in their lifetime. I asked the group, “what do you think we need, to change our society back towards the patterns of mutual caring and support?”

One old codger immediately spoke up. “We need to have another depression.” As soon as he said that, I thought, “surely someone is going to argue with him on that point,” but no one did. In marked contrast to the lively discussion that had been going on, there was an uneasy quiet that settled over the group.

Finally, I broke the silence and said, “Well, I hope that is not what it takes,” and we moved on to another topic. Nevertheless, his words have haunted me for years, now.

Do you remember what it was like in the immediate aftermath of 9-11? I sensed that people were a bit more patient with one another. There was more tenderness, less rude behavior in the stores and on the roads. In our own grief, we were aware that others were grieving.

We may be seeing the same kinds of subtle changes right now. Certainly, there is less cockiness, less swagger, less conspicuous consumption. When we know that our neighbor has lost her job, or our friend has lost his home, such things become a bit unseemly. And when we're in danger of losing our own home, or we've been relieved of our own job, it's simply not possible to behave that way.

But, beyond the headlines and the steady stream of bad news, there is good news, really good news. We Christians always have to raise up the good news. This is the good news: there is enough. Enough for all of us.

In fact, there is more than enough when we respond to the promptings of God's grace and in the knowledge that all things belong to him.