Sermon for JULY 16, 2023 Ezekiel 33:30-32 and Proverbs 11. 24-26 **“The Practice of the Open Hand”**

First, a reading from Ezekiel: *As for you, son of man, your people are talking together about you by the walls and at the doors of the houses, saying to each other, ‘Come and hear the message that has come from the Lord.’  My people come to you, as they usually do, and sit before you to hear your words, but they do not put them into practice. Their mouths speak of love, but their hearts are greedy for unjust gain.  Indeed, to them you are nothing more than one who sings love songs with a beautiful voice and plays an instrument well, for they hear your words but do not put them into practice.*

And then, for contrast, these words from the Proverbs: *One person gives freely, yet gains even more; another withholds unduly, but comes to poverty. A generous person will prosper; whoever refreshes others will be refreshed. People curse the one who hoards grain, but they pray God’s blessing on the one who is willing to share.*

We began our seven-week discussion of vices and virtues last Sunday with some talk about the deadly sin of Pride and the heavenly virtue of Humility. And I claimed that Pride was surely the worst of the deadly sins and has historically been given that “honor” again and again. But just because it is the worst does not make it necessarily the *most frequent* misstep the human race takes; today’s subject matter might be the prime stumbling block of our times, and perhaps of all times.

Today’s deadly sin is the sin of Greed. We are familiar with greed, many of us too familiar, but for all of our familiarity, we do not understand it that well. I hope we can change that this morning, grounding ourselves in a right understanding of greed, and even more, exciting us about the heavenly virtue that will rescue us from its obsessive grip, the virtue of generosity.

Greed, as we all know, has been around for a long, long time. Socrates, writing quite a while before Jesus came among us, said *“He who is not contented with what he has, would not be contented with what he would like to have.”*  And he nailed it – the fuel of greed, friends, is fantasy. We have all had the “what if you won the lottery” conversation, and cited all sorts of noble stuff we would allegedly do with our new-found riches. But data is different from fantasy…the vast majority of lottery winners end up desperate, destitute, and worse off in the end, because greed, first and last, is an appetite. And an appetite, by definition, can be slaked but can never be satisfied. The greedy person will always, always want more, well beyond what is reasonable, what they need, what they can use. There is a reason the Lord’s Prayer says, “Give us this day our daily bread” and does not say, “Give us more bread than we could ever eat in a hundred lifetimes.” Because the deadly sin of greed would encourage us to take, take, take, and there is little room for interdependence and trust when one is living like that.

[Fyodor Dostoyevsky](https://www.goodreads.com/author/show/3137322.Fyodor_Dostoyevsky) was a well-respected Russian novelist who often explored religious and psychological themes. In [*The Brothers Karamazov*](https://www.goodreads.com/work/quotes/3393910)*,* published in 1880, he wrote this: *“The world says:* *"You have needs -- satisfy them. You have as much right as the rich and the mighty. Don't hesitate to satisfy your needs; indeed, expand your needs and demand more." This is the worldly doctrine of today. And they believe that this is freedom. The result for the rich is isolation and suicide, for the poor, envy and murder.”*

Despite our current political distaste for Russian thoughtfulness, Dostoyevsky rings a bell with which we are all too familiar, the worldly doctrine of self-satisfaction through acquisition. Greed promises satisfaction, it promises freedom, but it lies! It has surely earned its moniker as a deadly sin.

 My friends, we don’t have to cross all the way to Russia to understand this; greed is alive and well in our America. We can give it shinier, less disturbing nicknames, like entrepreneurship, or even ambition, which makes it sound more innocent, but a wolf in sheep’s clothing is still a wolf! And so successful has our training into greed been that storage units for un-needed, often unwanted stuff are popping up everywhere. I am not against possessions; they surely make life more bearable and more interesting and more enjoyable, too. What I am against, of course, is the addiction to acquisition that the Bible calls greed.

 Since we are bopping around the globe linguistically, let me transition to my comments on the heavenly virtue of generosity with this quote from the ancient Chinese philosopher [Lao Tzu](https://www.goodreads.com/author/show/2622245.Lao_Tzu) *-“The wise man does not lay up his own treasures.
The more he gives to others, the more he has for his own.”* He sounds a lot like Jesus there, doesn’t he? And a lot like his contemporary Solomon, the writer and compiler of the Proverbs, who said: *“A generous person will prosper; whoever refreshes others will be refreshed. People curse the one who hoards grain, but they pray God’s blessing on the one who is willing to share.”* This is the conundrum of the ages, that in giving away, we are filled. That in sharing, we are satisfied and provisioned. And theologically speaking, this is the whole bowl of noodles in one tidy place: God gives us life and love and assets and family on loan, friends. They are not ours to hoard, not really. But they are for sharing, for improving the lives of those around us, and for adding meaning and value to our own existence.

The short version might be this; the problem is greed, the unquenchable desire for more and more and more. The solution is generosity, the unquenchable desire for less and less and less. I remember the old bumper sticker and you probably do too, that *the one who dies with the most toys wins.* I cannot tell you how to feel, but in light of scripture and Christian teaching across the centuries that bumper sticker surely cannot be true. More likely, the truth is the opposite, that the one who dies with the *least t*oys wins, and had a less stressful, more enjoyable life, too.

The Latin word that we translate as generosity is a familiar Bible word: *caritas*. It’s most literal English equivalent is charity, but that word sadly has acquired some historical baggage. It is the thing that Paul holds supreme in his famous writing to the Corinthian Christians…meanwhile, these three abide, faith, hope, and charity, but the greatest of these is charity. Charity, love, generosity, all peas from the same pod. The other Latin bible word Paul uses a lot is politically charged in our day and age, but still a wonderful word for this discussion: *liberalitas*. Liberality. Not getting stuck as a storage facility or a hoarding center for the gifts of God, but living to give, to extend, to share, liberally.

I will close with one more quote, this time not from an ancient source, but from a modern writer, the prolific and beloved Noah Ben Shea. I have updated his language to be more inclusive, but this next sentence remains a gem despite my polishing. Listen to this clear thinking: *“Either the key to a person's wallet is in their heart, or the key to a person's heart is in their wallet. So, unless you express your charity, you are locked inside your greed.”* Wow*.* That is the capital T truth, friends. Jesus offered much the same advice in more words when he advised us to look to the things we treasured, for where our treasure was found, there would our hearts be found as well. The challenge to us all, a challenge made infinitely more complicated by being part of the largest capitalist country on the globe, is to see our way through the offered treasures to the things of actual value. All that glitters is not gold, right, and Madison Avenue has been at this for a long, long time, trying to get us to create meaning out of stuff that they sell and from which they profit mightily. It is really hard to move through greed to generosity, to embrace the practice of the open hand rather than the life of the grasping fist. But unless we express our charity, we are locked inside our greed. Please don’t let me be remembered like poor Ezekiel, who was doing pretty good, he thought, until God reminded him: *Indeed, to your people you are nothing more than one who sings love songs with a beautiful voice and plays an instrument well, for they hear your words but do not put them into practice.* Please, let’s not be that congregation! For these words, some mine but also Socrates, also Dostoyevsky, some Lau Tzu, some Ben Shea and quite a bit of Paul and Jesus and God Almighty too, these words can change our lives if we will but put them into practice. Don’t let greed win! Let us be the people, not only of open hearts and open minds and open doors, but the people of the open hand. It is the truth that will liberate us all. Amen.