

1st Sunday of Lent
3rd Sermon of Mission
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The Capital Sin of Greed

(Thanks to Mother Nadine, Superior of the Intercessors of the Lamb,
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CAPITIVITY

Monkey trappers in North Africa have a clever method of catching their prey. A number of gourds are filled with nuts and firmly fastened to tree branches. Each gourd has a hole cut in it just large enough for the monkey to stick its forepaw in it. When the hungry animal discovers the nuts it quickly grasps a handful, but the hole is too small for the clenched fist full of nuts to be withdrawn from the gourd. The monkeys don't have enough sense to let go of the nuts in order to escape the trappers. Their singular focus on what they want leads them into the captivity.

Most of the time when we think of greed, we define it as the hoarding of money or possessions. Like the monkeys, we think of a greedy person as one who tries to hoard anything and everything that appeals to them. While that's a very good definition, it can often be too simplistic. Ultimately, greed is not about money, it's about security. Greed is the need for security, and that security is usually obtained by the control we exercise through money and possessions.

PURCHASING SECURITIES

Think of the last significant thing you or your family purchased. What was going on in your life or the life of your family at the time? Statistically, you would be in the majority if you said that things were stressful at that time. As I've thought about the last few significant purchases I've made, I have come to realize that they were made at very stressful times. The purchase of my first motorcycle is the perfect example. I had wanted a motorcycle since I was a kid, but hadn't really pursued the idea. Then the proverbial rug was ripped out from underneath me. An unexpected turn of events left my world upside down as I had to move to a new place within a few weeks. I felt very disoriented. The move left me with some money I hadn't expected, and I bought a motorcycle on impulse. I'm not normally an impulse shopper, so the purchase was very frightening (especially since I didn't know how to ride a motorcycle)! I can look back now and see that buying the bike was my way of trying to regain control of an otherwise out-of-control situation. Since I couldn't direct the normal course of events in my life, I exercised the little control I had—shopping. This is what greed is all about—trying to find security and control in “things” rather than God. And it doesn't always have to entail shopping, as many of the examples from the Bible show us.

GREED IN THE BIBLE

The need for security and control is found often in the Bible, but one of my favorite stories is that of Abraham and Sara. God promised them many things. One of His promises was that Sara would give birth to a son so that Abraham's family would continue on for centuries and centuries. While Abraham and Sara believed God's promise, even though she was past childbearing years, they quickly grew impatient waiting for God. Taking control of the situation, Abraham had a child through one of his maidservants, Hagar. She gave birth to Ishmael. Abraham and Sarah did not trust in the Lord and find security in Him alone. They were greedy for a child.

Another unusual example is found in the Gospels. It is the story of the transfiguration of Jesus on the mountaintop. I find it fascinating that Saint Augustine interpreted Peter's desire to stay and build three booths an example of greed. During the transfiguration of Jesus, Peter saw a vision of Elijah and Moses, standing with Jesus, in God's glory. Saint Peter tried to take control of the moment by suggesting that three booths be built to commemorate and perpetuate the glorious experience. But Jesus wasn't interested in staying in the security and peace of that moment. He knew that he and his disciples needed to journey down off the mountain and into more ministry.¹ Jesus showed us through his life, death and resurrection that security can only be found in God and God's will.

In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus explains that, "no servant can serve two masters; for he will either hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other" (Luke 16:13). In other words, we cannot try to find security in two different places. We must single-heartedly turn to God every moment of every day. We must allow God to be in control, rather than letting the things of this world control us. A better way of saying this is found in 1 Timothy: "There is great gain in godliness with contentment; for we brought nothing into the world, and we cannot take anything out of the world; but if we have food and clothing, with these we shall be content. But those who desire to be rich fall into temptation, into a snare, into many senseless and hurtful desires that plunge men into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is the root of all evils; it is through this craving that some have wandered away from the faith and pierced their hearts with many pangs" (1 Tim. 6:6-10).

CONTENT WITH UNCERTAINTY

I think the most important word in that Scripture quote is "contentment." There are many people in the world who aren't content. Many of us have felt the pain of uncertainty. We know what it feels like to be anchorless in the stormy sea. So we reach for something. We try to find security and control through the anchors of money and possessions. But God asks us to let go of these. Jesus illustrates this point in the Gospel of Luke when he tells the story of the poor widow who gave money to the treasury. Jesus

¹ Saint Augustine writes, "Now however Jesus says [to Peter]: Go down upon the earth, and labor there, and be a servant upon the earth, and upon the earth be despised, and crucified. Life came down, that it might be slain; the Bread, that It might hunger. The Way came down, that It might be wearied on the journey; the Fountain, that It might thirst; and do you refuse to labor?"

said, “Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all of them; for they all contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty put in all the living that she had” (Luke 21:3-4). The actual Greek word used to describe her giving is βάλλω, which literally means to give over to one’s care, uncertain about the result. The widow was willing to live with the uncertainty of her giving because she sought security in God alone. Purging ourselves of greed has little to do with taking inventory on what we own, and everything to do with living with the uncertainties of life by trusting God.

THE MANY FACES OF GREED

Our desire to find security and control in things other than God can show itself in many ways. Greed can appear as 1) materialism, our desire to accumulate “things,” 2) a desire for what we don’t have, 3) an immature attitude about what we do have (“It’s mine!”), 4) an attachment to religious devotions, practices, articles, or even a particular pew in church, 5) a need to know what God is doing—always seeking details, and being impatient with the speed with which God does things (example: Abraham and Sarah).

OVERCOMING GREED

We can look to Job to find out what our attitude should be toward the things of this world—“The Lord giveth, and the Lord taketh away. Blessed be the name of the Lord” (Job 1:21). While this is easy to say, it is much more difficult to have this level of trust and security in God. A few practical ways we can grow in Job’s attitude are:

- 1) Pray.
- 2) Ask God for the virtue of generosity.
- 3) Spiritually work on our relationship with God, paying close attention to our motives.
- 4) Accept everything that comes.
- 5) Meditate of the poverty of Jesus.
- 6) Try to use only what’s necessary.
- 7) Tithe, tithe, tithe (P.S.—we don’t give to the Church because the Church needs money, but because God has asked us to give back to Him 10% and the “first fruits” of our labor).
- 8) Offer time, talent, treasure AND PRAYER! Prayer is the greatest gift we can give.
- 9) Share with others what we have.
- 10) Take care of what God has given us (i.e.—be good stewards).

Young babies cling to everything. New parents are often frantic in trying to “baby proof” the house by locking up and taping down everything the baby may try to grab. We adults are often like those little children—we greedily cling to anything and everything. God wants us to cling to Him alone, to find security in Him alone. If we cling to anything less than God we’ll find ourselves in the same place as those African monkeys, captivity.