

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham  
“Being Human: Greed and Mercy”  
Rev. Dr. John Judson  
March 11, 2018

Matthew 5:7; Luke 12:13-21

How many of you here this morning saw the movie Finding Nemo? For those of you who never saw it, it is a movie about a Clown Fish, Nemo, who gets separated from his family, and the ensuing adventure as Nemo’s father goes in search of him. It had everything that a movie ought to have. It had comedy. It had drama. It had great characters. It showed us what bravery and loyalty look like. It even had a happy ending. But the best parts for me were the sea gulls, as they zipped around the screen saying...and you can say it with me. “Mine, mine, mine.” This was one of the best parts because it not only reminds me of how gulls sound, but it also reminds me of the way our children once sounded. “It’s mine and you can’t have it.” It was then the first image that came to my mind when I began to think about greed; people who went around saying, “Mine, mine, mine.” But the reality is that those gulls are not greedy. They are hungry. Rather than greedy they are needy. And when they are full, they stop saying, “Mine.” I’ve never seen a gull, take more fish than they need, fill up a cooler with them and then keep other gulls away. They only take what they need. Greed is different.

I define greed by using a three-part test. Greed is when people say “Mine, mine, mine” over something that they do not need, do not appreciate (or are not appreciative of) and do not share. All three of these are necessary for greed. What this means is that all of you gear heads with classic cars are safe, because even though you don’t need that hemi-cuda in the garage and you don’t share it, you do, or at least I hope you do, truly appreciate it. But, back to greed. We can see all three of these factors at work in our Jesus’ story for the morning, which by the way, Jesus told as a story of greed. First the farmer does not need all the grain that the ground produced. He could spend the rest of his life trying to eat it and he would never get through it. In fact, Jesus’ audience would know that so much grain would probably rot before the owner could eat it. Second, he was neither appreciative of, nor did he really appreciate his grain windfall. If he were, he had would have joined his fellow Jews out in the fields during the Feast of Booths, and given thanks to God. All he could think about was what to do with it. There was no sense of gratitude or even accomplishment. Finally, he did not share it. Again, to fully appreciate his not sharing, the Jewish Law was very clear that one was to share what one had with widows, orphans and the poor. To not share with the multitude of the poor was a sin. This was greed at its worst.

Some of you here this morning, might wonder why this is such a big deal. After all, who does greed hurt? The answer is that greed is a sin that hurts not only the person who is greedy, but others as well. Greed affects the greedy person by isolating them from others. All that matters to them is themselves and what belongs to them. If they connect with others, they might have to share, and they cannot bear to do this. Walls are then created to keep other people out. By keeping people out, the greedy become less and less human and begin to simply be what they possess. For those of you who have ever seen or read Dickens’ A Christmas Carol, Scrooge is the perfect example of how greed isolates. He

has great wealth but he is all alone. Greed also affects others. We live in a world of great need. People are hungry. People are thirsty for clean water. People need housing. People need so much. What greed does is that it takes what might be shared with others and keeps it locked away. This is the image of the man building better and bigger barns. Rather than selling some and giving alms to the poor, or giving away the grain to the hungry, he keeps it all for himself, and others suffer. Greed is a sin that cuts both ways. So how do we turn things around? The answer is to be merciful.

Jesus tells his friends that, “Blessed are the merciful for they shall receive mercy.” This may appear to be a bit odd because we usually don’t associate greed and mercy. Sometimes when we think of mercy, we think of the “mercy rule” in sports where when one team is so far ahead of another that they stop the game, so the losing team is not totally embarrassed. Sometimes we see mercy as what a judge gives to a defendant. Rather than sentencing someone to harshest penalty the judge shows mercy and lightens their sentence. While both hint at what Jesus is referring to here, there is another aspect of mercy that comes to us from the Psalms, and that is mercy refers to God showing mercy by giving human beings things they cannot earn or provide for themselves. God gives us this creation. God gives us love. God gives us forgiveness. In our story this morning we see mercy being extended to the farmer in that it is the earth that gave him the crop. Jesus’ listeners would know that the farmer did not provide the rain, or make the original seed, or probably even work the fields. That would have been done by others. The farmer had been shown the mercy of God, but in his greed failed to pass that mercy on. But the gift of God is that when we show mercy, we reverse the curse of greed in two ways.

First, when we show mercy we leave isolation behind. When we show mercy by sharing what we have as God shares what God has created, then we become connected with those with whom we share. The walls between us and them come down allowing us to love our neighbors as we love ourselves. Second, when we show mercy, we offer to others what they cannot earn or provide for themselves, and in so doing make a difference in the lives of others. Greed is left behind and mercy becomes a way of life. And by so doing we open ourselves up more and more to the mercy that God shows to us. Returning to A Christmas Carol, we see what happens when Scrooge begins to show mercy. He reconnects with his nephew and family, and Tiny Tim gets his surgery. Mercy wins and greed loses.

How can we do this? How can we learn to show mercy? How can we leave behind the words, “Mine, mine, mine”? The answer is to say, “Ours, ours, ours.” For those of you who are history buffs, this is not socialism or communism. This is a way of understanding what we have is the result of the mercy of God. To say what we have is, “ours” is to say it belongs to God, it is ours on loan, and it is for the benefit of others. In the other words, the “our” in ours, is God, us and neighbor. By thinking in terms of “ours” we begin to be those who show mercy in all that we do and with all that we have. My challenge to you for this week then is to ask yourselves, “How am I seeing all that I have as “ours” and not “mine”?