

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham  
The Vocabulary of Faith: Greed  
The Rev. Dr. John Judson  
March 17, 2019

Deuteronomy 24:17-22; 1 Timothy 6:7-10

Twenty-three billion dollars. It may not seem like a lot of money to some people in D.C., but it seems like a great deal to me. And it ought to seem like a great deal to most of us because it is the value of commercial fishing and recreational boating on the Great Lakes. In other words, the Great Lakes are a significant economic generator for all the states that border the lakes. Unfortunately, all of this could be at risk because of a single fish, the Asian Carp. The Asian Carp, even though it is actually four species of Carp, has the ability to destroy the entire Great Lakes eco-system if it is given a chance. It can do so because it has a voracious appetite allowing it to consume between five and twenty percent of its weight each day. It is an eating machine that knows no bounds. If allowed to do so it would consume almost all the food used by all other species of fish in the lake. In addition, they have this nasty habit of leaping up out of the water at the sound of propellers, and hitting people in the face, knocking them down. Thus, making recreation on the Lakes a lot less appealing. So why am I talking about Asian Carp? I am doing so because I want you to think of Greed as the Asian Carp of God's relational ecosystem. Let me explain.

The Biblical story is that when God created the world, God created it in such a way that all living beings, plant, animal and human, could flourish. God created an ecosystem in which all living things could live together, share this planet and flourish. In terms of human beings, this ecosystem had two components that would allow them to flourish. The first was a vertical component. The vertical component was that human beings were to look "upward" to God for love, forgiveness, guidance and direction. If human beings did so they could flourish by being open to God's gifts and by giving thanks back to God. The second component was horizontal. This was the interconnectedness of all humanity. Like tree roots in forests that intertwine for shared support and nourishment, human societies were designed to be able to work together to support and nourish one another. In this eco-system, human beings could reach for and find their purpose and reach their potential, each living into their calling to be God's children. This time, though, unlike the possible consequences of Asian Carp in the Lakes, Greed has already done great damage to this relational ecosystem.

First Greed has damaged the vertical aspect of this system. To see this, we can go to the Greek definition of greed, which is, "*An insatiable desire for more.*" When it says more, it means greed is not limited to money. Greed is an insatiable desire for more of anything: money, power, sex, fame, tech-toys. The Roman philosopher Seneca put it this way, "*For greed, all of nature is too little.*" Greed is like trying to fill a bucket with water when there is a massive hole in the bottom. Regardless of how much one puts in, it will run right out. And this type of greed damages the vertical portion of the ecosystem because those who are possessed by greed never "look up." They never turn their eyes toward God looking to be filled with the good gifts that God offers; the good gifts that God desires to give to human beings, peace and contentment. Instead, greed causes people to keep their eyes on the horizon always looking for more...more of whatever it is that they believe they must have. More of what will not fill them.

Second, greed damages the horizontal portion of the ecosystem. To see this, we can go to a Hebraic understanding of greed, which is, "*a selfish or excessive desire for more than is needed or deserved, regardless*

*of the consequences to individuals or humanity.*” This understanding lives in the world of the zero-sum game, which sees individual attainment as the only goal. In other words, if you have something, it means there is less for me. Therefore, I must not only desire more than I need or deserve, but I will do whatever is necessary to get it. This damages the horizontal ecosystem because it sees “the other” not as a partner, but as a competitor, an enemy to be defeated so that what they have, I can take because I deserve it. This leads is to injustice. As Julian Casablancas puts it, *“Greed is the inventor of injustice as well as its current enforcer.”* This is the greed that led to slavery and child labor. This is the greed that allows Payday lenders to charge an average annual interest rate of 400%. This is the greed that damages human relationships, communities and our world.

What ought we to do then? In this face of greed which is damaging God’s relational ecosystem, what ought we to do?

First, we begin by reestablishing the vertical dimension of the ecosystem. We do this by remembering. The writer of Deuteronomy tells his readers that they are to remember that once upon a time they were slaves and that God redeemed them. This reminder is intended to draw God’s people, including us, back into the story of God’s providing love. For it was God who heard the cries of God’s people. It was God who freed them. It was God who clothed and fed them. It was God who gave them this land flowing with milk and honey. It is God who waters the land. In other words, we are to restore the vertical by remembering that all that we have is a gift. And as gifts are not to be greedily sought, they are to be thankfully received. When we do this, we look up and we connect again with the God who desires to fill our emptiness with the goodness of love and communion.

Second, we then move to reestablishing the horizontal dimension of the ecosystem. We do this by restoring. Again, the writer of Deuteronomy tells his readers, including us, that we are not only to look up to God and remember God’s mighty work for them with thanksgiving, but that we are then to restore the fortunes of those who have little hope. We are to ensure that aliens and orphans, those with no power, are given justice, meaning that they are not taken advantage of or harmed in any way. We are not to take a widow’s garment in pledge, meaning we are to insure that the widow is warm and protected. When we take for ourselves the fruits of our work, like wheat and grapes, the very sustenance of life, we are not to take them all, but we are to share them with those who do not have. And by doing all these things, we reestablish the interconnectedness of humanity, which will according to the writer, allow God to bless all of our undertakings.

A tendency to greed is in us and around us. It is part of the context of human existence. Yet it does not have to rule us, which is why this church community matters. For it is here that each week we work to reestablish our vertical connection with God. And it is here and from here that we work to reestablish our relationships with those who struggle by sharing what we have, that all might have enough. Today there is a special opportunity for all of us to help rebuild that wider community of humanity. And that is, at 6pm at the Muslim Unity Center there will be a vigil in support of the Muslim community of New Zealand. I would encourage as many of you as possible to attend as a way of moving away from Greed and toward a greater humanity.

My challenge to you then is this, to ask yourselves, how am I healing God’s relational ecosystem through looking up to God and sharing what I receive with others.