

“Be Careful! Be Very, Very Careful”

As I told you last Sunday, the bumper sticker read: *“Dear God, All I Ask is the Opportunity to prove that Winning the Lottery Won’t Change Me.”*

“Be careful!” Jesus says, *“be very, very careful.”* Be careful about what? About all kinds of greed. There are many.

The most obvious is the greed exemplified by Scrooge McDuck. When I was a kid I would read the comics that told how Uncle Scrooge would totally lose control of his mind when he caught “gold fever” and went off on some wild goose chase to find more riches than the trillions he already had in his money bin. That bin was also the object of desire for the Beagle Boys, who were always constructing fantastic plots to deprive Scrooge of his riches. It was never said in so many words, but you got the message that Huey, Dewey, and Louie, the three nephews who lived with poor, hapless, and futureless Uncle Donald Duck were the ones you would want to emulate because they usually saved the day for Uncle Scrooge by thwarting the sinister plots of the Beagle Boys by following the Junior Woodchuck Manual. But there was always that money bin, so filled with coins that McDuck would daily go for a swim in his loot.

Scrooge McDuck was greedy. So were the Beagle Boys. *“Be careful!”* Jesus says, *“be very, very careful.”*

The pay to an NBA Rookie this season ranges from a minimum of \$ 1,613,700, to a maximum of \$ 8,131,200 with an average of \$ 2,737,600. A bench warmer on an NFL team will collect a minimum \$610,000 and could make as much as \$915,000; officials in the NFL earn up to \$205,000 per year; and they really do work only one day a week (a charge often leveled at pastors)! Major League Baseball players earn a top annual salary of \$ 42 million (Max Scherzer) and an average salary of \$ 4.17 million. By contrast, the average pay for Teachers: \$61,000; for Fire Fighters in major cities: \$ 51,000, and Policemen earn between \$25-88,000.

“Be Careful!” Jesus says, *“be very, very careful.”*

Sports and entertainment figures are valued very highly in our culture. Those who protect us are deemed less worthy; even less so those who nurture and train our children. We place a high price on entertainment . . . a very high price.

“Be Careful!” Jesus says, *“be very, very careful.”*

It is greed to want to become LeBron, or Deshaun, or Max because they make so much money. It is greed to desire their fame, prestige, and influence.

“Be Careful!” Jesus says, *“be very, very careful.”*

There are some people whose greed is for affirmation from others. They are known as “people pleasers” — it is yet one more form of dysfunctional behavior. Without even realizing what they are doing, they give off the appearance of someone who is helpful, organized, energetic, ready to take on any new task, cooperative, outgoing . . . but inside there are these imbedded fears of rejection, loss of approval, value, importance. So they try harder; and fall deeper into the morass of loneliness, depression, and identity crisis.

“Be careful!” Jesus says, *“be very, very careful.”*

In the Parable of the Rich Fool (today’s Gospel), Jesus sets out the nature of greed. Like all sin, it turns us inward, shutting us off from God and others. Listen to this epitome of arrogance: ***“I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul, ‘Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.’”*** My barns, my grain, my goods, my soul.

“Be careful!” Jesus says, *“be very, very careful.”*

All greed does this. The greed of jealousy . . . leaves us isolated from the very one or ones with whom we earnestly seek intimacy. In our greed to

posses that relationship for ourselves exclusively, we wind up with no relationship worth having. The greed for status . . . makes us hunger for identity that is grounded in lies and distortions about one's value. The only status that matters is that which we have in Christ as a child of God — and not in the generic sense (“We are all God's children”), but as co-heirs with Christ.

That takes us to the greed of addiction . . . We don't normally speak of addiction in those terms, but all addictions — alcohol, drugs, gambling, sex, food — have the same underlying issue: what's most important is me. Indeed, this is at the heart of all greed. The greed for fame, possessions, talents . . . the greed for wealth — they all turn our thinking inward: *“How can I have what she has?” “When will I get to the top?” “Where is my next fix?” “When will my name be up in lights?” “Why isn't my house filled with more junk than my neighbor's?” “When will my uniqueness finally be discovered and the accolades due to me finally descend?”*

“Be careful!” Jesus says, *“be very, very careful.”*

The greed for wealth, though, is likely the most insidiously destructive. All the more so when we, who are wealthier by far than ninety per cent of the world's population refuse to acknowledge the wealth that is ours. *“I'm no Jeff Bezos or Elon Musk. I can hardly manage to keep my house over my head,”* we say as we speak to our spouses in separate vehicles over our two smart phones so that he/she can pick up food on the way home from work (‘cause we're both working) to that home that, by the standards of Africa, Asia, South and Central America, would be regarded as palatial.

“Be careful!” Jesus says, *“be very, very careful.”*

Because wealth, quicker than anything else, inserts that wedge between us and God. Any level of wealth does this. Our natural, sinful bent inward tells us we are secure. But the reality is that, in that moment, we have lost all security. Whenever we place our identity in something we

can lose, we've had it! So don't do that! Don't place your identity in your family, your job, your career, your reputation, your status in the community, your wealth. Luther grasped this: *"And take they our life, Goods, fame, child and wife, Let these all be gone, They yet have nothing won; The Kingdom ours remaineth."* [A Mighty Fortress, Stanza 4; The Lutheran Hymnal Hymn 262; Copyright © 1941; St. Louis, Concordia Publishing House.]

"Be careful!" Jesus says, *"be very, very careful."*

"Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth," St. Paul counsels us, *"for you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God."* Your life is hidden . . . even from you. Oh, we think we have the future planned: our annuities, our stock options, our retirement plans. Who, my age or younger, is feeling all that bold about the support we can expect from Social Security in our futures? Not too many. And so we get stuck on what might or might not be. We zero in on what we could lose. NO! Says Paul. Redirect your thinking (or to quote Luther again: *"Your thoughts are too human!"*)

Get out of the greed business and get on with God's business. *"Put to death . . . whatever in you is earthly: fornication, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed (which is idolatry)."* Kill it, wipe it out, eliminate it, get rid of it! Not some of it. Not most of it. All of it. Now, I'm not sure that the phrase *"which is idolatry"* applies to all the *"earthly"* distractions, or just greed (I tend to lean toward the view that idolatry fits all five of them).

What makes anything idolatrous is that it turns us away from God and, more often than not, toward self. The irony, according to St. Paul, is that you have to put to death what has already died. *" . . . you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God."* All that would lead you away from God, all that wants to entice you to focus on yourself, was drowned with Christ in the waters of your Baptism. Yet daily — nay, hour by hour and minute by minute — we have to kill off those impulses that the sinful self so desperately wants to embrace.

The only thing you really have is Christ and His Kingdom. Everything else, all that we consider so important, nay vital, is to quote the Preacher: “**Vanity**” The Hebrew word here is לֵבֶלֶ *hevel*, that which is fleeting, like an ephemeral puff of wind which cannot be grasped, concretized, or hung on the wall. This word is repeated 9 times in this lesson; it is not to be ignored.

Our English word, “vanity,” comes from the Latin *vanus*, meaning “empty.” The Preacher tells us he has learned something significant over his years: All the stuff we think is so important; all the time and energy we invest in what we think is important; all the resources we devote to, or expect to get from, this invested time and energy . . . All of it is *hevel*.

My father often remarked: “*Whether you’re rich or poor, it’s nice to have money.*” Yes, it is nice to have money. Money can, in many ways, make life easier. Conversely, as Tevye prays in *Fiddler on the Roof*, “*God, it’s no great shame to be poor. But its no great honor, either.*” The problem is not the money itself or the lack thereof. The problem is always where we place our attention — on ourselves . . . or on God. If God chooses to bless you with abundance, that’s what God chooses to do. Thank Him.

But listen closely to Jesus: “***Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.***”

“*Be careful! Be very, very careful.*”

Amen.