

More is Less

June 12, 2016

So there we have it: two Old Testament passages about two greedy kings. Who would have thought that when you were going to have a lay person be speaking today that we would be focusing on two Old Testament or Hebrew scriptures? First, in 2 Samuel, King David wanted the wife of another man. Then, in 1 Kings, King Ahab wanted a vineyard that the owner wouldn't sell.

But they're not just stories about greed. There's another element to them. They're about violent ecological theft by the greedy. The poor man loses his beloved lamb in Nathan's illustration to David. Then, at the will of Ahab and his wife, Jezebel, Naboth loses his vineyard and his life.

God's reaction to both of these events shows disdain for greed and concern for the close ties between humans, their land, and their animals. These were drastic reactions. Although David admitted his sin and the Lord forgave him, Nathan still tells David that the sword shall never depart from your house and that the child that is born to him will die. Elijah tells Ahab that in the place where dogs licked up the blood of Naboth, dogs will also lick up your blood.

Wow! Those are both disturbing passages. Why in the world would I have chosen them as the basis for my message? Because, as you may see in the bulletin or have seen out front, the title of my message is "More is Less."

First, greed for more and the self-centeredness that greed comes from makes us less of a lot of things. We're going to focus on three things that greed makes us less, and actually I had just heard this morning about what had happened in Orlando and it made me think that the whole greed for more also means sometimes it's greed for more people who are like ourselves. We're afraid of the other and so we look for things that are more like us and so our first point, actually, is that greed for more makes us less inclusive.

So, when I'm not up here sharing with you all, I'm a second grade teacher. One thing that I've noticed more this year than in the past is that a lot of my students like to give away their things when they have extra, it could be school supplies—pens, pencils, cap erasers; snacks—takis, candy, and I'm glad that they appear generous. But sometimes I also wonder how much of their giving away is to make friends. And, as the teacher I often have to tell them that, though I appreciate their generosity, but if they're giving something to others in the classroom and there's not enough for everyone, that they can't give it away. We need to include everyone when we're part of a group.

So, when we're talking about inclusivity, inclusive of what? Inclusivity does not support the interests of men alone or women alone, blacks alone or whites alone, straights alone or gays alone, the powerful alone or the repressed alone. But even beyond those groups, it doesn't support the interests of society alone over and against God's entire realm of creation nor the nonhuman world over and against society. Rather, these should co-exist in our attention as they do in our creator's.

So let's look at the story of Naboth's vineyard again. The king knows that Naboth was right in not handing over his family's vineyard. Naboth was completely within his rights to hold on to his property, his inheritance. Not even the king's hand extends into another person's inheritance.

So, here was Naboth, a mere subject of Ahab's kingdom, with no extraordinary or powerful means of recourse against the action of his monarch. But, if Ahab was willing to give Naboth another piece of land or to compensate him financially for the land, why would Naboth object with such vehement words? "The Lord forbid that I should give you my ancestral inheritance."

The issue can be summed up with one word: land. Naboth was not being obstinate. He was striving to protect the land, the source of income and stability that was his family's God-given gift. According to Numbers, Joshua, and Leviticus, the land of promise had been divided among the children of Israel and each family's division was to be kept in perpetuity. Ahab's offer asked Naboth to forsake his birthright, his own inheritance from God for the mere sake of a whim of a king.

It reminds me of the story of Jacob and Esau in which Esau agreed to exchange his birthright for a bowl of stew from Jacob. However, in this case, Naboth does realize the value of his birthright and his inheritance, the value of the land.

So, how do we understand this kind of greed for property that belongs to another? Or, how do we translate rightful ownership of inheritance into our culture today?

In a capitalistic society where we are entitled to all that we can purchase, is there a limit to the reach of our money? In other words, just because we can afford it or because we have the credit to buy, is it ours to rightfully acquire? Something that may come to mind is buying cheap clothes because we can. That, ultimately, keeps people in poverty in other parts of the world. Is that wanting to make someone's vineyard into my vegetable garden?

Or buying bananas, or coffee, or chocolate, something that almost every American household purchases? Almost none of us live anywhere close to where bananas, or coffee, or chocolate are produced. It cost an enormous amount of resources from the earth to deliver them to us. Is that wanting to make someone's vineyard into my vegetable garden? I don't know the answers. I know there are things like Fair Trade, but I'm going to keep asking the questions. I invite you to continue to ask the questions along with me because greed for more, greed for more people like us, greed for more stuff for ourselves makes us less inclusive of not only people in society, but of the earth.

The next thing that greed for more makes us is less Christ-like or Creator-like. Originally I had considered writing my message about the lectionary reading from Luke and the woman who anointed Jesus at the home of Simon the Pharisee. It's a New Testament passage after all and it deals with forgiveness, faith, and peace besides emphasizing the faith and love of a woman. However, a friend of mine with whom I taught in Honduras posted something on Facebook that I haven't been able to get out of my head since. In a minute, I believe you'll see why.

My friend wrote: "When the head of the CDC (Centers for Disease Control) breaks down pleading for more funds to stop the spread of Zika, you know it's serious. Our Congress acts

irresponsibly and puts people's lives at risk. The biggest threats that face us are those linked to climate change. Vote wisely.”

That really got me thinking. Back on February 9th of this year, the New York Times reported that the health ministries of Brazil, Ecuador, Columbia, Jamaica and El Salvador had recommended postponing getting pregnant or having children for anywhere from between six months to indefinitely. At that time in February, the World Health Organization was not endorsing that idea.

However, Friday – two days ago, after I started planning this sermon and chose the scriptures that we were going to use – the World Health Organization or the WHO has concluded that people living in the areas where the Zika virus is circulating should consider delaying pregnancy to avoid having babies with birth defects. This advice affects millions of couples in 46 countries across Latin America and the Caribbean where Zika transmission is occurring or expected.

According to a recent study, more than five million babies are born each year in parts of the Western Hemisphere where the mosquitoes known to spread the virus are found. More than 1,500 babies have been born with microcephaly in Brazil. Six other countries and Puerto Rico have reported cases of microcephaly resulting from locally acquired Zika infections.

The advice from the WHO and from the health ministries was criticized by reproductive rights groups which said that it was hypocritical coming from governments that often outlawed abortion and made it difficult for women to get birth control. Some Roman Catholic archbishops also objected. But, still, if women were able to delay pregnancy for just one season in which Zika was widely transmitted, it is likely that so many people would gain immunity from having been bitten that the virus would either completely disappear as happened in previous Pacific island outbreaks or would circulate at only very low levels the following year.

So, what's the answer? Why am I even talking about this at church? Why should churches involve themselves with political issues like climate change and related issues? Well, I think it's because our faith compels us to protect the earth and the welfare of those living on it – present and future – and to exercise our citizenship in advocating for measures that do so.

Just as in the Civil Rights Movement, regarding the environment, justice deferred is justice denied. It's been almost a year since *Laudato si'* was released, which is Pope Francis's monumental encyclical on climate change. He also, if you recall, visited the U.S. in September and addressed Congress. And, by him speaking into this debate, it has shifted it somewhat. He examined climate change from all angles and addressed not simply Catholics nor only people of faith but all the world's human inhabitants conferring on this crisis the gravity it deserves.

In fact, it wasn't the Catholics, but the Quakers who initiated this nation's oldest nonpartisan ecumenical lobby. The Offices of the Friends Committee on National Legislation (the FCNL), the nation's oldest lobby, stands just across the street from the U.S. Senate offices. It's also worth remembering, considering our history here at Union, that it was the Quakers who two centuries ago led the charge for slavery's abolition.

Greed for more, greed for more of the earth, greed for more land, greed for ourselves and not thinking of others and the ramifications of our actions makes us less Christ-like or Creator-like.

The last point I'd like to make is that greed for more makes us less loving. Let's get back to our kings. Even King David, like I said to the children, who was good most of the time and King Ahab, who was bad most of the time, tried to grab what was not theirs. Greed is something with which we all struggle. Like I discussed with the children, an antidote to greed is gratitude, the prayer that Pastor Bridget taught us: Thank you.

So, finally, to touch on the New Testament passage from the lectionary today, in Luke, Chapter 7, one of the Pharisees, Simon, asks Jesus to eat with him. It then tells us that an uninvited guest came, a woman in the city, who was a sinner, and brought an alabaster jar of ointment. She bathed Jesus' feet with her tears, dries them with her hair, kisses them, and anoints them with the ointment.

Simon is incredulous that Jesus is allowing this sinful woman to touch Him. In true Jesus style, Jesus uses an illustration and asks Simon about a creditor with two debtors: one who owed 500 denarii and the other 50. The creditor canceled both of their debts when they could not pay. Jesus finally asked Simon which of the debtors will love the creditor more. Simon answered, "I suppose the one for whom he canceled the greater debt." And Jesus said to him, "You have judged rightly." Then, turning toward the woman, he said to Simon, "Do you see this woman? I entered your house, you gave me no water for my feet, but she has bathed my feet with her tears and dried them with her hair. You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not stopped kissing my feet. You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment. Therefore, I tell you, her sins, which were many, have been forgiven; hence she has shown great love. But the one to whom little is forgiven, loves little." Then he said to her, "Your sins are forgiven."

Greed for more makes us less loving; gratitude makes us more loving.

So, in conclusion, greed for more affects our treatment of God, others, ourselves, and the earth as well, as how they are all interconnected. So the next time you hear the phrase, "less is more" or "more is less" like our sermon today, remember what we learned from King David and King Ahab. Greed for more makes us less inclusive. Greed for more makes us less Christ-like or Creator-like. Greed for more makes us less loving. However, gratitude makes us more inclusive. Gratitude makes us more Christ-like or Creator-like. Gratitude makes us more loving.

May our gratitude make us more inclusive, more Christ-like or Creator-like, and more loving.
Amen.

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