

These days there seems to be some confusion about who is a villain in stories. For example, in the 1987 movie *Wall Street* the character Gordon Gekko, a ruthless stockbroker played by actor Michael Douglas, was never intended to be the hero. Oliver Stone, the director of the movie said he made the movie to show people how things were changing, that the stock exchange was growing greedy, as were many other institutions in the 1980s. The iconic speech the character made in the movie where he proclaimed, “greed is right,” was based on an actual commencement ceremony speech given by real life inside trader Ivan Boesky in 1986 who said, “Greed is alright, by the way. I want you to know that. Greed is healthy. You can be greedy and still feel good about yourself.” However, not long after giving this speech, Boesky was arrested and served time in jail for illegal insider trading activity.

Despite his punishment, the philosophy that “greed is good” was not recognized for the evil it is but was embraced as the ideal way to live one’s life. Years later, director Oliver Stone received feedback from thousands of people telling him because of the movie *Wall Street* they changed their lives to go into finance so they could make a lot of money like Gordon Gekko. When Stone said Gekko was the bad guy, not someone to emulate, the response he got was people thought Gekko’s fictional life looked exciting, and they wanted money so they could do whatever they wanted without a care in the world. Stone was right, things were changing, including who people saw as the good guy or bad guy in a story and in life.

The embrace of greed was so prevalent it infiltrated pretty much every part of life. Small businesses were bought out by large corporations to be “flipped” only to be written off as bankrupt and closed when the small company couldn’t produce enough profits for corporate stockholders, and the towns and cities those companies were in suffer to this day. Politicians started receiving financial support from wealthy individuals and corporations if they promised to pass legislation that benefited those corporations or exceptionally wealthy elite instead of their constituents. Institutions of higher learning started listening to consultants who introduced methods of cutting departments that didn’t bring in certain levels of income which has significantly changed many colleges and universities, many of which are struggling with decline today. Even churches were unable to escape similar consultants who inspired fear of closure that caused a shift from focusing on Jesus to the number of people in the pews and the amount

of money those people give to the church. Instead of loving God and our neighbors, churches were pressured to come up with mission statements, vision statements, and a specific number of goals to achieve. It's no wonder so many churches are also struggling.

While such practices might sound reasonable or just the way things are in our modern times, they are really cleverly disguised forms of greed. When we think of greed, perhaps we envision someone hoarding possessions. But there are, as Jesus said in today's Gospel many forms of greed. That is why Jesus also said we need to be on guard, be cautious; greed can insinuate itself into life quite easily, because it doesn't always look like someone taking something from someone else. Sometimes, greed promises to give power and prestige, or the ability to live without care. However, if we pay attention to those consumed by it, we'd observe greed never gives what it promises, it only takes, like the character who died at the end of Jesus' parable in today's Gospel.

Greed is still considered one of the 7 Deadly Sins, which means it is not the stuff of life. Greed will not bring a person closer to God or others. Greed causes harm, loss of life, and has no love in it. According to our Anglican tradition, it is defined as "the refusal to respect the integrity of other creatures and the desire to and actual misuse of things or people or animals. Greed is the inordinate accumulation of material things, taking advantage of people for personal gain, or pursuing power, status, or wealth." In other words, greed fools a person into putting themselves in the place of God, believing they can do better than God and manipulate people and the planet into doing what they want. Greed fools you into thinking you can do what you want or say what you want, even hurtful things, without consequence.

Although there was a rise in the social acceptance of greed in the 1980s, today's Gospel is evidence that the sin of greed has been around for much longer. Living in a consumer economy like we do now, it can be difficult to recognize when we are dealing with greed. People like Marie Kondo the decluttering expert can inspire us to consider the stuff we own and what we need to keep or give away, which can look like a generosity, but she is also getting wealthy while doing so. The comedian George Carlin had a brilliant routine about all the stuff we have and how we need to build bigger houses or storage units to keep all our stuff in, like the parable Jesus told today, but greed isn't just about accumulation.

Greed is the sweat shops that pay women a pittance to work in unhealthy and dangerous conditions to make clothing so cheap we can buy more than we need. Greed is what motivates us to purchase items without care for where they came from or how they were made or the system that distributes them. Greed

fools us into thinking we can reverse climate change by purchasing certain items or driving certain vehicles but not regulating the carbon emissions from major industries like coal burning power plants. Greed can be tricky like that.

Like Jesus said, there are all kinds of greed, and we need to be on our guard to not buy into it. Not because stuff is bad. Not because it is wrong to have more than one kind of coat or multiple pairs of shoes or books or tools. But because greed leads to unnecessary suffering and loss of life, like in the parable.

Remember, this parable is Jesus' response to someone who wanted him to force their brother to divide the family inheritance, and Jesus refused to take the place of a judge. Instead, he warned his followers there are many kinds of greed and told the story of a wealthy man who God called foolish. That God called the character a fool is an important detail in the parable. The word translated "fool" in the Gospel implies not ignorance but wastefulness. We can infer in God's judgement the man wasted his life in pursuit of wealth, and in so doing has perhaps wasted other's lives as well. That is how greed is linked to oppression.

Also, according to our tradition and much more hopeful, the antithesis of greed is generosity and liberation. This is why we have a pay it forward system in our coffee shop ministry CrossRoads Café. In a financial culture based on debt, the concept that anything has been paid for already is unheard of for most of our customers. It is so contrary to the concept of greed that I not only had to explain it, I had to advocate for it when working with a student group that was helping us come up with a business plan for CrossRoads Café. One of the criticisms I get about our coffee shop is we don't take credit cards. This is because - believe it or not - that system is a form of greed, that takes far more from the business and purchaser than the cost of any item. But we don't think about it because we like the convenience. However, I learned credit card companies are dehumanizing. They show no mercy when jobs are lost or employers do not pay what they promised, or however a secure income is lost. A company representative will advise to get the money owed by any means possible and threaten jail. They do not care about people, they do not care about families, they do not care about communities, they do not care.

Instead, we have something much more caring going on at CrossRoads Café. Many of our customers, including several OU students, give generously to the pay it forward fund. This creates a liberating culture of inclusion, generosity, and welcome. It has not made us famous or rich, but it does something different. It shows we care about people, we care about life, and we practice what we preach. Likewise, when the vestry decided to give money from a fund that was not being used to children in our area struggling with poverty, especially children

of color, in response to the 2020 *American Experience* documentary on PBS *Growing Up Poor In America* that featured children in The Plains, Marietta and Columbus – literally in our backyard – we as a parish recognized the role greed played in creating the poverty in our part of the state and are doing what we can to be generous. We can't totally fix poverty, but we have provided healing rest to people who otherwise could not afford to rest, and helped a child realize an opportunity to compete at a state level that they would have had to decline. Rest or travel can be things we can take for granted, but for someone else are out of reach. By bridging the gap, we helped stand up to the damage greed causes not just to economies, but to people's physical and spiritual wellbeing.

In times of financial stress and fear, maybe we can see how someone might mistake greed as the best way to survive and look to characters like Gordon Gekko as heroes. But we have Jesus reminding us greed is not good, nor it is right. There is no joy in it. No love. No life. It will not save you. It is nothing like God's Kingdom. Greed is a lie like every other sin, it will not give what it promises and will only take more than anyone can pay. Jesus calls us to something different. To gratitude for what we have, what we are given, and for what we can share. For there are even more forms of generosity, gratitude, mercy, opportunities for sharing, liberating, forgiving, renewing, healing, and repairing. All the ways the Kingdom of God can bring life and love to all people.