

Sermons from Park Hill: September 21, 2008

Sermons from Park Hill Congregational UCC Denver, Colorado

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Exodus 16: 2-15 “Greed”

Rabbi Robert Alper tells a story about calling a synagogue and getting this message on the voice mail: “Thank you for calling Temple Beth Shalom. If you’re calling from a touch-tone phone and would like membership information, press one. For our service schedule, press two. To complain to the rabbi, press three. To complain *about* the rabbi, press four, five or six.”

Every time I read this text from Exodus 16, I take special note of the first verse we read: “The whole congregation of the Israelites complained against Moses and Aaron.” That line quickens the heart of every religious leader who has ever read it.

And what had Moses done... except to reluctantly agree to accept a call that came through a bush that was on fire, setting aside his safe, comfortable, and

obscure life as a shepherd in Midian; what had he done except to put his life on the line by standing up to the most powerful man in Egypt and demanding an end to his economic system of slave labor; what had Moses done except to part the sea so the Israelites could escape from their slave-masters who were bearing down on them in their chariots – from whom they would have certainly received even more cruelty as runaways. But, “what have you done for me lately.” It had now been six weeks after all.

Actually, they didn’t wait six weeks to begin complaining. In the text immediately preceding today’s, it says that after *three days* of freedom, the people complained against Moses. Now, in this case, I agree with the people. They went three days into the wilderness and found no water, and when they finally got to Marah, the water was bitter. So they complained. But what happened?

Remember how God heard the cries of the Israelites in the first place and responded by calling Moses to lead them out? Well, once again, God heard their cries and showed Moses something that he could throw into the water to make it taste better. So, Moses took a piece of wood that God showed him and threw it into the water and it became sweet. (I’m sure someone in the congregation must have complained that the water was much too sweet.) But, once again, God had responded to their complaints.

But then God made a statute and ordinance with them and put them to a test. “If you will listen carefully to the voice of the Lord your God, and do what is right in my sight, and give heed to my commandments and keep all my statutes, I will not

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bring upon you any of the diseases that I brought upon the Egyptians; for I am the Lord who heals.”

When God had revealed God’s name to Moses back at the burning bush, it was *I AM WHO I AM*. God has added to this: “*I AM THE ONE WHO HEALS YOU*,” not destroys you. And immediately after making this “deal” with the Israelites – that they must simply listen carefully and follow God’s directions through this wilderness – they “came to Elim, where there were 12 springs of water and 70 palm trees; and there they camped by the water.” What a huge oasis in the wilderness. And kind of a clear message. Trust me. I’m not going to hurt you. You were thirsty. Here’s something for you to drink, more than enough. Twelve springs of water and 70 palm trees were clearly more than enough for their needs. After spending a few weeks in this paradise, they set out again. Six weeks after leaving Egypt.

And then the very first thing out of their mouths: “If only we had died in Egypt. You’re going to kill us with hunger.” And God, once again hearing their complaints, promises to provide enough food for every day – meat every night and bread every morning. Imagine. No more slave labor. Freedom. A vacation in the original Palm Springs. Meat every night in the middle of no where. And that flaky stuff. In a great line any parent can recognize when their kids sit down to dinner – what is this? My response would be “It’s what you’re gonna eat.” Moses more politely said, “It’s what God has given you for your hunger.” I am God who provides enough.

But the lectionary has stopped too short here. This passage isn’t just about responding to the hunger pangs of the Israelites – that God provides. That’s true. But if we continue reading, we discover it is

also about setting the limits between what they need and greed, and the result of greed. This is what comes right after my version of “It’s what you’re gonna eat.”

Verse 16 begins: “This is what the Lord commands.” Go out and gather up as much as you need – enough for everyone in your family. So they did. Some took more, some took less, but when they measured it, those who took more than they needed had nothing over the measure assigned each person; and those who didn’t take enough somehow had just enough. Everybody got just what they needed. Moses instructed them that they couldn’t keep any extra for the next day because God would provide exactly what they needed every day. Of course, some people acted greedy and took more than they needed and tried to store it up for themselves. But in the morning, it was all full of worms and smelled awful. The result of their greed.

This was a week I couldn’t help but reflect on the destructive nature of greed. The financial system in this country of the last “how many” years has been based on unbridled, unregulated, “let them do whatever they want” as long as it makes more money; a voracious, unrelenting pursuit of more for fewer and fewer people. I couldn’t watch the news or read the papers this week without concluding that the mess we are in is the result of an unrestrained disregard for the common good – unrestrained disregard for the common good – also known as greed. And now it’s full of worms and smells awful. As I reflected on this topic, I came to realize that greed isn’t just getting more for myself. Greed is not caring what happens to anyone else as I do it. Greed is even an active disregard for others.

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The common good, as witnessed this week, perhaps in my naïveté, appears only applicable when the rich are failing. Who cares about the common good as long as the rich are making money? We finally long ago abandoned the myth of wealth trickling down. Trickle down economics is not only not talked about because it doesn't work, but it also doesn't seem to matter any more. The constant flow of statistical facts that the rich have been getting richer and the poor have been getting poorer has mostly been received as "Oh well. That's the way it is." And to blame the poor for a lack of initiative, bad choices. But all of a sudden, the rich are getting "poorer," and the response is "Oh no! We've got to do something." Yes, we do. And it's got to be a response that doesn't forget this lesson of letting greedy people lobby their way to the top, wearing golden parachutes in case their get rich quicker schemes don't work.

Some months ago, I took note when the idea of helping home-owners avoid foreclosure was seen as bailing out consumers who made bad choices. "They should have known what they were getting into." I was almost one of them. Back in Cleveland seven years ago, I almost got into an 80/20 mortgage with an adjustable rate and a balloon payment after ten years. I counted on a mortgage broker helping me realize that if I hadn't gotten a raise in seven years, it wasn't likely that my salary would rise to the level necessary for the next adjustment in the interest rate. And buying with the premise that if I got in trouble, I could simply sell the condo for more money than paid - obviously it wasn't sound advice. I trusted that he wasn't just in it for the commission and that they system would somehow weed out a predatory loan company, an overzealous broker, and an unqualified buyer. Thank God, literally, that something happened so I didn't go forward.

Payday loan companies in Ohio complained vigorously when a bill was put forward to limit the 300% interest rate they were charging to their poverty-stricken customers. They cried that it was unfair to limit their profit potential and that they were the only ones willing to "serve" in the inner city. Their lobbyists got the legislators to limit their damage with a 45% interest cap.

Banks lobbied hard to change bankruptcy laws to make it nearly impossible for individuals to file. Now, similar punishment doesn't seem to apply the other way to the banks. But how many people have filed for bankruptcy because of exorbitant medical bills - or rather, how many would file if they could. If concern for the common good mattered in this country, we'd have health care so that individuals wouldn't need to file bankruptcy. Providing universal health care is too expensive, we're told. But not \$700 billion and counting for company after company bailed out from our common purse?

I can't argue that leaving things to fail would have been a better strategy for our common good. I honestly don't know. I'm not an economist and I have to trust that those in charge care about the whole country, not saving a few. Because this isn't just an economic crisis; it's a moral crisis. And letting some people walk away unharmed while the majority of workers are left to fend for themselves with declining wages or no job at all is a moral travesty. And recognizing what the drive for material excess by Americans does to impoverished people around the globe - it's not just our system that's crumbling under the weight of our moral failings. We should know that our corporate behavior has been sinful.

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My thoughts on greed, sin, and the common good were a great match for an article I found by Jim Wallis, the founder of Sojourners Magazine. He writes of the current crisis, "We now need wisdom from the economists, prudence from the business community, and renewal courses on the common good from the nation's religious community. It's time for the pulpit to speak."

Jim wrote what I think is a stellar piece of analysis and I want to share some of it with you. "The financial collapse on Wall Street is the fiscal consequence of the economic philosophy that markets are always good and government is always bad. But it's also the moral consequence of greed, where private profit prevails over the concept of the common good. The American economy is [so] rooted in materialism, a culture that continues to extol greed, a false standard of values that puts [big shareholder] profits over societal health, and a distorted calculus that measures human worth by personal income instead of character, integrity, and generosity."

He continues, "The entrepreneurial spirit and social innovation fostered by a market economy has benefitted many and should not be overly encumbered by unnecessary or stifling regulations. But left to its own devices and human weakness (let's call it sin), the market too often disintegrates into greed and corruption, as the Wall Street financial collapse painfully reveals. Capitalism needs rules, or it easily becomes destructive. A healthy, balanced relationship between free enterprise on the one hand, and public accountability and regulation, on the other, is morally and practically essential. Government should encourage innovation, but it must also limit greed."

I found that simple and helpful. But while I really appreciate Jim Wallis' analysis, one still has to question whether our current system is the best system for the common good. When we were here interviewing last year there was an article in the *Rocky Mountain News* about a professor who was fired from Colorado Christian University. Andrew Pacquin was fired for "undermining" the Christian school's commitment to capitalism and free enterprise by assigning readings that were critical of it, including reading Jim Wallis.

Former Senator William Armstrong who is president of Colorado Christian University in Lakewood said, "I don't think there is another system that is more consistent with the teachings of Jesus Christ" than free enterprise. Among the schools core values is a commitment to free markets and limited government. I give them credit that at least one of their ten values is compassion for the poor, but nothing about justice for the poor. Before firing him, Armstrong wrote to Pacquin that it was "deeply troubling to hear you say that capitalism [may be] inconsistent with the teachings of Jesus."

I don't know how you say that and retain any integrity for the gospel. Personal salvation in heaven isn't an excuse to destroy public institutions that protect us from harm on earth, from greed. The pulpit must speak.

But my sermon isn't meant to be political. I'm trying to engage an unavoidable moral question raised this week. And I'm amazed at how such a significant current event is addressed by a scripture passage for today assigned years ago. Our nation's financial house fell because, I believe, it was built on a foundation of greed – greed elevated to a position

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high above the common good and even extolled by some Christians. That's wrong! God tested the greed of the Israelites by giving them everything they needed for every day; those who took more than they needed found the next morning that it was full of worms and had an awful smell. It was rotten.

Those who actually pay taxes have a lot of worms and smelly manna to unload, while in the meantime people with no health care continue to get sick, students with special needs go underserved, technology to keep from fouling our earth and skies with more fossil fuels goes unfunded...and the common good – the kingdom of God for the poor, oppressed, and captive – goes unrealized. Too busy cleaning up the mess from greed.

So what is the message from this sermon for you? I wrote out a bunch of questions but realized they were easily summarized in this: How much is enough? Do you have what you need? And do we have faith in the God who provides? Continuing to reward greed will be devastating to this country, so do, as God said to the Israelites, Do what is right.