

Don't Be a Greedy Zebra!
Preacher: Rev. Lauren Lorincz
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When I was little one of my favorite books was called Greedy Zebra. The story tells how African animals came to look so unique or outright beautiful. The story goes like this—long ago all the animals in the world were a dull and dusty color. And then one day a cave appears in the ground, full of furs, skins, horns, tails, lots of colorful fabrics, and needles and thread. Word goes out and all the animals rush to the cave to see these new items, except for Greedy Zebra. Greedy Zebra just hangs back munching on some grass, he can't be bothered to run off to some silly old cave.

The animals all pick their new coats and horns and tails and Greedy Zebra just keeps eating. Finally, he trots to the cave after seeing how lovely Antelope looks, and on the way he imagines how he'd like to look as he passes more animals. Greedy Zebra wants to have spots like the Leopard and horns like Kudu and a mane like Lion and a tale like Cheetah. But he's dismayed to find that the only fabrics left are a few strips of black cloth. He stitches them together and squeezes into the fabric. He goes down to the stream to eat some more, and then his coat bursts open, his tummy squeezes through the seams, and the monkeys roar with laughter. The final line of the book is, "To this day his chubby stomach shines through his coat because he is so greedy."^[1]

I read this book all the time, so much so that it's become a family saying. We tell each other, "Don't be a greedy zebra!" or "you're such a greedy zebra!" when we want to call one another out. The other day my puppy Fritz had every single toy I've gotten him surrounding him on the floor, and I called him a greedy zebra when I tripped and almost fell over his loot. The story of Greedy Zebra is funny, and it points to our second Deadly Sin—today we're talking about greed.

Greed is a much discussed topic in our public discourse. How can you speak about our financial situation in America without dealing with some immoral or outright greedy business practices that got our economy in a bind? The Occupy Wall Street Movement has taken the frustration of many folks to the streets, and they're still active in many cities. On their website, here's what they say about who they are: "Occupy Wall Street is a people-powered movement . . . fighting back against the corrosive power of major banks and multinational corporations over the democratic process, and the role of Wall Street in creating an economic collapse that has caused the greatest recession in generations."^[2] You can admire these protesters or dislike them, but it's worth noting that one of their main issues is the existence of greed in American life.

This morning's scripture passage fits in well with what the Occupy protesters are saying. These are some harsh words—Jesus in frustration tells his disciples, "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God."^[3] So what do we do with this apparently confrontational passage, especially if we happen to be one of these rich people Jesus is talking about?

First of all, we need to know that the rich man is the only person in the entire New Testament who doesn't answer Jesus' direct call to follow him. I'll say it again, this man is the only one who says no when Jesus says, "Come, follow me."^[4] He goes away, grieving, because he has so many possessions.

Money is presented as a stumbling block; it separates us from one another. In this case, it separates this earnest man from Jesus Christ, and that's saying something. He follows all the

other commandments, and Jesus doesn't love him any less than anyone else. In fact, Mark tells us, "Jesus, looking at him, loved him" before Jesus tells the man that the one thing he lacked was to sell his possessions, give the money to the poor, and follow him.[5] The man just can't bring himself to do it.

In a way, he's perhaps as complacent as greedy zebra. The man loves his stuff more than Jesus, just as greedy zebra loves eating the grass more than discovering what wondrous items awaited him in that cave. The rich man simply can't picture his life without his wealth. His wealth creates a divide between himself and others that he can't overcome. It's the very separation that Jesus desperately wants him to give up in order to find more meaning in his life, in order to discover that there are riches he'd attain only after giving up his stuff. Jesus knows this is hard, but he loves this man and asks him to let go of his possessions in order to gain a different kind of wealth. The man can't go there. And I don't know if many of us could either if we're really honest with ourselves.

Harvard Economist Michael Sandel speaks of this concept of wealth separating us from one another in his book *What Money Can't Buy: The Moral Limits of Markets*. Sandel says, "Great wealth creates a world so insulated, so protected, so luxurious that the rest of humanity is easily forgotten." [6] Sandel's major illustration deals with sports and new stadiums with elite seating for the wealthy, he calls it the "skyboxification" of American life. Sports used to be democratic—we were all on the same level. You could have people from many walks of life gathered together to watch their team. Sure, seats may have varied by price, but the difference wasn't as stark as it is today. Now club seats or skyboxes separate the wealthy to such an extent that there may be no interaction whatsoever, there are often separate entrances and parking lots to have access to these exclusive seats to emphasize this idea.

My family had season tickets to the Cleveland Browns for about 40 years, so I went to games with my dad and grandpa all the time. They tried their best to direct my attention to the field exclusively so I wouldn't see people around us getting drunk or into fights or yelling obscenities at the referees or the chaos that was the Dawg Pound. We sat in our seats next to all sorts of people, and that was part of the fun. Interacting with and observing all these colorful fans was part of the experience of a Browns game, much to my dad's and grandpa's chagrin at times, and I loved it.

It makes me think of a letter that was sent to the Browns in 1974. A season ticket holder and his attorney complained that some of the fans near him were sailing paper airplanes from the game programs and that this practice could cause serious eye injury. The letter closed by stating, "Please be advised that since you are in a position to control or terminate such action on the part of fans, I will hold you responsible for any injury sustained by any person in my party attending one of your sporting events. It is hoped that this disrespectful and possibly dangerous activity will be terminated." [7]

The response from the Browns is priceless. I had to edit to not curse, it goes with the territory with Cleveland Browns football—the Browns are 0-5 at the moment after all. One of the attorneys for the Browns organization responded to this complaint about paper airplanes by writing back to the attorney included on the original letter. He said "Attached is a letter that we received on November 19, 1974. I feel that you should be aware that some [moron] is signing your name to stupid letters. Very truly yours, James N. Bailey, General Counsel for the Cleveland Stadium Corporation." [8]

What this letter illustrates is the democratic nature of football, at least in the 1970s it would seem. The message is get over the paper airplanes, we're glad you're a season ticket holder, but that doesn't make you so much more special than anyone else attending the game. Oh, and get over yourself too. Wealth can separate us and possibly create a sense of entitlement.

Entitlement and greed are not ways of being in this life that we should easily ignore or excuse. We especially shouldn't excuse them given the immoral business practices we've seen in our financial sector and the "skyboxification" of America.

The virtue that can come out of the Deadly Sin of Greed is simply Wanting Wisely. We can teach our children (and we can learn too) that there is a difference between wanting something and needing something. The two are not the same thing, and we need to understand this or we'll be a whole nation of complacent greedy zebras who just sit back and munch on the grass, ignoring everyone around us.

UCC Pastor Robin Meyers emphasizes that wealthy people aren't evil, but that it does matter how you use your wealth in the world. If our wealth isolates us and separates us from everyone else, if we lord our wealth over other people, well this is wrong and stifles our growth as people as the story of the rich man illustrates in the Gospel of Mark.

But if our wealth can bring people together and make our communities better somehow, then let's use it to do so! Meyers says, "What matters is how the wealth was acquired, at what cost, for what purpose and to what end." [9] This is where we can do a great deal of good, to what end are we using our resources? It's a great question we can all ask ourselves. We have the means to do so much good in our community in our world, and dare I say, in the Church when we let go of the Deadly Sin of Greed and simply Want Wisely. So let's not be a bunch of greedy zebras! Oh, and Go Browns! Amen.

[1] Mwenye Hadithi and Adrienne Kennaway, Greedy Zebra.

[2] Occupy Wall Street, "About," <http://occupywallst.org/about/>

[3] Mark 10:24-25.

[4] Mark 10:21.

[5] Ibid.

[6] Michael Sandel, What Money Can't Buy: The Moral Limits of Markets, 164.

[7] "Absolutely Epic 1974 from Cleveland Browns to a Fan," <http://www.clevescene.com/64-and-counting/archives/2010/12/22/absolutely-epic-1974-letter-from-cleveland-browns-to-a-fan>

[8] Ibid.

[9] Robin Meyers, The Virtue in the Vice: Finding Seven Lively Virtues in the Seven Deadly Sins, 156.