

July 31, 2016 11th Sunday after Pentecost
Rev. Jen Nagel, University Lutheran Church of Hope

Ecclesiastes 1:2, 12-14; 2:18-23, Psalm 49:1-12
Colossians 3:1-11, Luke 12:13-21

. Atlantic Magazine, May 2016, "The Secret Shame of the Middle Class," by Neal Gabler, pg. 52-63,
Davidlose.net for this date. Ideas and quotes from Rev. Jane McBride.

Let us pray: May the words of my lips and the mediations of our hearts be acceptable ...

Grace and peace to you, from our God of rich mercy and overflowing abundance.

The May edition of *The Atlantic* includes a cover story titled "The Secret Shame of the Middle Class." The author, Neal Gabler, cites a survey by the Federal Reserve Board revealing that "nearly half [47%] of Americans would have trouble finding \$400 to pay for an emergency."
"I'm one of them," Gabler adds, and then he goes on:
"I know what it is like to have to juggle creditors to make it through a week."
"I know what it is like to be down to my last \$5—literally—while I wait for a paycheck to arrive, and I know what it is like to subsist for days on a diet of eggs.
I know what it is like to dread going to the mailbox, because there will always be new bills to pay but seldom a check with which to pay them...
And I know what it is like to have to borrow money from my adult daughters because my wife and I ran out of heating oil."
Gabler writes, "You wouldn't know any of that to look at me. I like to think I appear reasonably prosperous. Nor would you know it to look at my résumé. I have had a passably good career as a writer... You wouldn't even know it to look at my tax return.
I am nowhere near rich, but I have typically made a solid middle- or even, at times, upper-middle-class income, which is about all a writer can expect..."

The cover picture that accompanies Gabler's article is a man with a brown paper bag over his head. In fact, all the pictures throughout the article are simple, staged shots of paper bag clad bodies mowing the lawn, posing for a family picture on the sofa, buying groceries—all wearing paper-bags over their heads. Like many in *The Atlantic*, it is an intriguing article, and it captivated me, in part for its study of economics, and in greater part for the way it opened a subject that is so often isolating and couched in anonymity.

Gabler's account of what led to his situation is too complex to repeat except to say that it was a mix of financial illiteracy, bad luck, tragedy, wishful thinking, and deflation of wages.

Though our family sometimes feels stress around money, we've not experienced the turmoil he describes and that some of you, or those you love, know or have known intimately.

With money, we've made some good choices and some bad choices.

Luck and privilege and family support have largely insulated us from the consequences of our mistakes.

But the reality is that this financial stress and desperation is faced by so many Americans, so many us, 47%, and the brown paper bag sense of humiliation and failure and isolation and fear is all too real.

If these are the economic struggles of a white upper middle-class man in a wealthy nation, what is the plight of the truly poor, and what about everyone else?

So why am I knitting together the painful, often hidden, financial crisis of middle class America and today's parable from Luke about the wealthy farmer who hoards his excess and builds yet another barn? Why? Because in Luke, the Gospel Good News Jesus preaches has everything to do with how we relate personally and as a community to money, to material possessions.

Greed, for Luke, is death, death to the spirit, utter poverty.

And, in turn, **generosity**, for Luke, is life, the richness of God's blessings.

Did you hear the rich man's inner monologue in the parable in the Gospel?

It is relentlessly self-focused. Listen again:

"He thought to himself, 'What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?' Then he said, '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.'"

This man: he is alone in this story, talking to himself, talking about himself, alone, isolated.

Greed and wealth have tangled him so tightly, he is completely isolated from God, and from everyone.

Neal Gabler writes of a similar sense of isolation describing how he never spoke of his financial crisis.

"You certainly wouldn't know it to talk to me," he writes, "because the last thing I would ever do—until now—is admit to financial insecurity or, as I think of it, 'financial impotence,' because it has many of the characteristics of sexual impotence, not least of which is the desperate need to mask it and pretend everything is going swimmingly."

This has been a hard summer for our world and that temptation to isolation and fear and greed is real, and it is just that: temptation.

I hear that temptation in the news and endless commentary of two weeks of political conventions.

I sense it in the attempts on all sides to erode our trust in a candidate's character and competency.

I see it in ISIS' increasing madness, in their determination to violate the very sanctity of life.

I feel it close to home as we grapple with race, class and privilege, fear, and the overwhelming power to kill.

So what's the message for us today? With Luke's help, Jesus says it clearly: "Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one's life doesn't consist in the abundance of possessions."

Our faith invites—no, demands— that we struggle against greed, our own greed, our society's greed:

that we face the temptation that we need more and better,

that we talk back to the hiss of fear saying stuff and money, and even bullets, will give us security,

that we dare to share our struggles honestly and make space and safety for these hard conversations.

that we create communities—racially diverse communities—rooted in a trust in God's abundance.

If we're real, if we're honest, this is a radical re-orientation in a world strung out on greed.

Around University Lutheran Church of Hope we have a new stewardship committee that likes to go by the name: The Gratitude and Generosity Team. They are on fire, and that name is completely accurate!

As I've listened to their plans, I know they are shaping a congregational culture of gratitude, of generosity..

One of the things they're planning for the coming years is a chance to create money autobiographies.

How often have you thought about the messages you've absorbed from childhood on about money, about giving, about scarcity and abundance and security? A money autobiography.

Our Gospel reading this morning ends with a line about being rich toward God.

What does it mean to be rich toward God? What will it look like? How will it feel? How will we act?

I challenge you to take some time today or early this week to think about this question; jot it down if needed:

What does it mean to be rich toward God?

Think about it, but also in a spirit of countering isolation, have a conversation about it with someone else, perhaps a good friend or your spouse, or talk at coffee time today and cross some generational lines.

Finally, the passage that follows today's talk of greed is a classic, "Do not worry about your life, what you will eat, or about your body, what you will wear...Consider the lilies of the field."

Remember those illustrations in *The Atlantic* article, the ones where everyone wore brown paper bags?

I'll tell you the truth from my vantage: you are much more beautiful without those paper bags.

In these challenging times, dear ones, consider the lilies, consider the love of our God, and the power of Christ's community to face one another, our fear, and our stuff, in truth and in honesty. Amen.