

BEING SATISFIED OR WANTING MORE

Luke 12: 13-34

I felt real pressure. This man who I had encountered over many years, had struggled to make a go of it. His business seemed to take off after years of hard work, but a combination of factors - from changing markets to family issues, to major health concerns - had caused him to lose everything. Now he was struggling from the ground up and was looking for help. I had offered some help through the church, but there was only so much we could do.

Besides this, I felt a different kind of pressure. Even though there was financial need, there was moral pressure too. I felt obligated as a Christian to help. But I also wanted to help the man find ways to cope. He carried not only distress and hopelessness. He was also bitter and resentful. And this bitterness and resentment also came to be directed at me. My life was so good in comparison. In his mind, I had little idea of what he was going through. After a while I found myself getting defensive, even resentful back at him. Whatever my situation or his situation, each and everyone of us must deal with whatever hand is dealt to us. And the only person who's going to suffer worse than the people around us who must put up with us is we ourselves in all our misery.

The word for what I picked up in the man was "covetousness." Covetousness is the focus of the 10th commandment of the 10 commandments in the bible: "You shall not covet your neighbour's house, your neighbour's spouse or family, or possessions or anything else that belongs to your neighbour. I am the Lord your God." (Exodus 20:17).

But this is easier said than done, no? Especially in a world where bad stuff happens. People don't always get what they deserve and far too many get what they definitely do not deserve. Plus we live in a world where we see what each other has. Comparison, competition and the desire for more is so prevalent it's hard to remain untainted, especially when you feel at the bottom end looking up and around at what everyone else has. It's hard not to covet when you feel hard done by.

Here's another example. A man came in to see me who is a father. He came to Canada as an immigrant, with nothing in his pocket. With hard work 12 hours a day, 7 days a week working multiple jobs, he saved up enough to start a food truck business. He made enough to support his family and his children through school. But his eldest son was not thriving. He was not motivated going to school in order to get a good job and make a living even better than his father. He was not satisfied with simple and straightforward goals. He wanted more than that - fame, fortune, travel. He wanted it all handed to him on a platter without having to put in the

many years of hard work starting from the very bottom and working his way up. It's as if the world of social media had shown him how the rich and famous live such a glamorous life while those less fortunate have to grovel for crumbs off the table of the privileged. The son didn't want to grovel as he saw his father grovelling. The father felt satisfied and fulfilled despite what it had cost him to achieve whatever he had. The son wanted to fast-track his life to success. He wanted so much more than his father. His father's world and desires were small. The son had big dreams but he was also frustrated at how far the reach was to get there. He was resentful and bitter with his lot and stuck too.

Some years back there was a nation-wide survey done of a cross section of people related to their incomes. People were surveyed with incomes ranging from \$50,000 to \$500,000. They were asked whether they were satisfied with what they earned or whether they felt they needed more. The surprising and yet not so surprising results found that whatever income people made, they felt that if they only made 20% more, they would be satisfied.

And this feeling of dissatisfaction is a feeling at the core of our being. It's an itch that when scratched can lead to all kinds of trouble. Business marketing knows this well. Advertising and the world of social media know that bombarding people with new, better and faster, with how the successful, rich, beautiful, and famous live it will influence so many of us feeling the dissatisfaction itch so strong, we will scratch it well beyond what's affordable, sustainable or healthy for our mental health let alone our planet.

But our capitalist world feeds on scratching the itch. Unless people buy and spend, and unless they want more and work for more never stopping to step back and ponder a different purpose and direction to life, the system will falter if not collapse. We need to keep growing for growth' sake never asking whether this is good for mother nature, our world or our individual souls.

OK, so what's the alternative? How may we find a way to satisfaction and even fulfillment that is not driven by the desire for more? Is all ambition for more a bad thing? Or is it a question of what the more is all about? Here's where the gospel of Jesus may help us.

Our reading offers some core teaching of Jesus about that itch for more so many of us have and the need to scratch that itch that our world of advertising is so good at triggering. But the surprising thing about Jesus is that he doesn't judge us humans for having that itch or trying to scratch it. Imagine if we didn't want more. Any improvement, development, growth and positive change cannot come without some ambition and desire for more and better. Being satisfied is fine and good, but making our lives and the lives of those around us and our world better is even better. We need some ambition, desire, conviction and compulsion to do that, no? Imagine if we here at Armour Heights simply decided we've done well enough now and we can just coast along not seeking to keep growing with curiosity to our constantly changing world

and our need to keep engaging it creatively and constructively. How long do you think we'd last?

And yet, Jesus also touches on the dangers of ambition for more. Covetousness is one side of the coin and greed is the other. While covetousness keeps us feeling dissatisfied and deprived compared to others, greed fuels our need to grab all we can for ourselves forgetting the people and world around us in need of love and care. Greed tells us we can never have enough even when we have enough. The need for more is never satisfied but for a moment. After we have acquired something more, new and better, it's not long before we start feeling the itch again along with dissatisfaction and worry. And ironically, even as we acquire more, we also worry more. Worry becomes compulsive. Stress becomes our lifestyle. We become obsessed with ourselves, what we have, what we lack, and our constant preoccupation with building walls of protection around our stuff. It's all a downward spiral where we lose all perspective and joy.

Even as the man in the parable finds a moment of imagined relief when he builds his bigger barns for all he has accumulated, we're told that the end of his mortal life is around the corner. All the time, effort and stress he's put into accumulating more and more, and storing it all securely against all threat of loss, has brought him to an end where he will lose it all because he will not live long enough to enjoy any of it, whatever enjoyment there is in it.

So what's the alternative? Is the alternative to constant dissatisfaction in our covetousness or constant worry in our greed for ever more just giving it all up? Well, Jesus does say that we need a reset. We need to step back and step out of the relentlessness of it all enough to ponder another way to live. Specifically, Jesus points to the birds, the lilies of the field, and even mere grass. Worry, stress, the constant coveting for more, the greed that can never be satisfied and the itch that constantly needs to be scratched... these are totally absent from the birds, the lilies and the grass. And yet, see how they exist? They work with the rhythms of nature and they do just fine and even beautifully. What can we learn from them?

We can learn about: enough. We can learn about simplicity. We can learn about letting go and calming that itch by not scratching it as our lifestyle. If the man in the parable just settled with enough crops to feed himself and his family and maybe store enough for the winter, wouldn't he be so much better off in terms of quality of life for the years he'd have left? Wouldn't he have more family time, community time, inner health time and spiritual Sabbath time? Would he not have more time to enjoy life rather than constantly worry about it?

Well, preacher, all of what you say is true, yes... but this is all easier said than done. We may covet what the birds, the lilies and even the grass can achieve, but it's hard for us human beings living in a capitalist world where the constant bombardment of our need for more is at us 24/7. It's fine for Jesus to speak it, but just giving it all up doesn't deal with how we're made as human beings with ambition and desire for more. Simplicity is good advice but not so easy to achieve

when we're still feeling the need to climb. Simplicity is fine and good when you have what you need. But many don't even have enough of the basics.

OK, well here is where Jesus also goes further than just following the wisdom of the birds, the lilies and the grass. At the core of our need as human beings and at the core of what can twist us up as human beings is not ambition in and of itself, but where it is all directed. What is our goal as human beings? What preoccupies us? What's the more we're after? Is it worth our concern and our worry? Will it ultimately satisfy our souls and calm our itch?

Instead of your ambition for more that is essentially material in nature, here's what you should aim for says Jesus: "seek God's kingdom, and these things will be given to you as well... Do not be afraid little flock, for it is your Abba God's good pleasure to give you the kingdom. Sell your possessions and give alms. Make purses for yourselves that do not wear out, an unfailing treasure in heaven, where no thief comes near and nothing can corrode. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."

There is the kind of treasure that corrodes and fades and there is the kind of treasure that truly enriches in a lasting way. The kingdom of God is not about material security, the accumulation of wealth and possessions. No. It's about the security, wealth and possessions that are spiritual, that ground you, elevate you and satisfy you deep in your soul. That's what you should be ambitious about Jesus is saying. Give generously, serve openly, and care heartily, and you will never regret it. This is what life is all about and when you discover this, all else falls into perspective. Plus, what you give comes back to you because someone will give back to you for your generosity. You will create networks of mutual caring. Cooperation and sharing is the alternative way to competition and capitalist greed.

So then, simplicity, yes. Having enough and letting go the wrong kind of coveting for more that will keep you in the cycle of constant worry and dissatisfaction, yes. But also, wanting more of the heavenly treasure and living into that with gracious generosity of material, emotional and spiritual presence and service... That's what it's about and, sadly, so much in our world is driving us in the wrong direction.

So then, are you satisfied? We all need enough to live, especially in expensive urban centres where the cost of living is so high. But how much do we really need? And, what is it we truly need? Are we ambitious toward the right things in our lives and the kind of treasure that is heavenly rather than earthly?

PRAYER: Come Holy Spirit... Find us where we are on our journey... Help us find what we need, materially and spiritually... Help us simplify our lives... Help us find peace... Calm our fear and our worry... Grant us perspective, and transform our heart's desiring ever more toward your kingdom goals... Amen.

