

Colossians 3: 1-11
Luke 12: 13-21
Hamilton Union Presbyterian Church
August 1, 2010

Jesus is often, and rightly, called the Great Physician. Much of this designation no doubt comes from his power to heal bodily illness. But for most of us Jesus is a physician of the soul. We may ask for physical healing for ourselves or others; but most of the time we are asking for healing of broken things that will never show up on even the most sophisticated medical instrument. Grief, loneliness, despair, anxiety, emptiness and regret will never show up on a CAT scan; yet they are real. Indeed they are the cause of many physical symptoms. It is to Jesus that we come with these signs of sickness of soul in hopes that he will diagnose and relieve our suffering.

As the episode in Luke illustrates, we are often confused about what truly causes our pain. We come to the doctor with what we think are heart problems and find we have intestinal acid reflux. In this case a man comes with what to him is a clear problem. All he needs is for Jesus to fix it.

For the man the problem is a justice issue. He feels that his brother is not fairly sharing the family inheritance. We will never know whether the man has a case or not. Jesus refuses to get involved. "Who made me a judge or arbitrator?" Go to Judge Judy.

He then turns his demand into a teaching opportunity for the disciples. We the latest generation of disciples are here to listen to Jesus. We are I propose invited to hear Jesus' teaching on two levels:

First we are called to listen to the content of Jesus' teaching. Second we are invited to identify with the man who brought his case to Jesus and to overhear his teaching as it applies to us.

Jesus makes a surprising diagnosis. The man has a spiritual disease. In Greek it is called *pleonexia*. The word even sounds like a disease! The prefix "pleo" means to fill or be filled much like the sail of a sailboat is filled with wind. The suffix indicates the desire to hold. Thus *pleonexia*'s most fundamental meaning is "*to be full of a desire to hold*". In the King James Version *pleonexia* is translated "covetousness" as in the tenth of the Ten Commandments: "Thou shall not covet." In the New Revised Standard Version the word is translated simply as "greed."

Jesus teaches that greed or covetousness are not to be judged by the outward signs. *Pleonexia* is a sickness of soul. To "be full of the desire to hold" is to be driven by a force which animates and organizes our values, our motives and our priorities. Just as a strong wind drives the sailboat, so the desire to hold drives the life of the one who is driven by it.

Note, too that Jesus warns against *all* forms of being filled by the desire to hold. And it is at this point that we are invited to overhear what Jesus might be saying. As I stand nearby here are some messages that I hear:

Stewart: Be careful of judging people by what you perceive to be their greed. The one you judge may not be driven to have more but may simply be blessed and grateful. He or she may be more full of generosity than you will ever be. *And by the way, what does it say about you that you are so fascinated by someone's wealth? Are we not a little jealous? Are we not content with what we have? Hmmm?*

Stewart: Do you remember the time you spent all day making an elaborate dinner? Your guests came and said “Nice meal!” *You thought, “Nice meal! Is that all? Not, this is the best meal I have ever had!” Don’t deny it. I was there. You were furious. It was like the whole point of the meal was for people to notice you and all your work! Greedy for compliments, eh!* Why not listen to the passage that Elder Hasselbarth read: “So if you have been raised with Christ seek the things that are above where Christ is.... Put to death, therefore whatever in you is earthly.” Did you notice that pleonexia is on the list?

Friends listening to Jesus I realize that I am afflicted with *pleonexia*. We have been diagnosed. This may feel like bad news. After all, we come to Jesus to be told how good we are and how much he loves us and to be encouraged to keep trying. The ideal that Jesus sees in us something that is sick and eating away at our souls is disturbing.

But to be diagnosed with *pleonexia* is in fact *good news!* Why?-- because Jesus, the great Physician can *do* something about it! Unlike the Apostle Paul, who—in this passage at least—suggests that we can put our greed to death, I know I cannot. It is part of who I am. My only hope of healing is to come to Jesus and ask him to heal me.

Jesus alone is qualified to do this. He is the only son of God who, in the words of Paul, in his letter to the Philippians “did not try to hold onto his equality with God, but let go of it in order to become human.” The power of Jesus birth is that right at the beginning Jesus had renounced the driving desire to hold onto his being God. Throughout his life and ministry, when faced with the opportunity to grasp power and wealth, Jesus renounced it and denounced Satan as the author of that desire. Finally, knowing he was

going to be betrayed, tortured and killed, he did not resist. He allowed his very human life to be taken from him.

Friends if you want to know what a life without the disease of *pleonexia* looks like you have only to look to Jesus. If you want to be free of the fullness of the desire to hold onto the world, look to Jesus. If you want to become free of this life destroying illness, take the prescription by Paul, the Great Physician's Assistant:

If you have been raised with Christ (which you have) seek the things that are above, where Christ is... Amen.