



Easter 4, Year B – May 3, 2009

*A homily preached by
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1987 saw the release of a film written by Stanley Weiser and Oliver Stone. I think many here will remember it. Wall Street was about a young and naively ambitious stockbroker and a ruthless and greedy corporate raider played by Michael Douglas who takes Charlie Sheen under his wing and introduces him to his formula for success. The film was written as an expose of illegal and ruthless practices in the stock market. There is a famous speech given by Michael Douglas's character that represents a mantra for many of these stock market players.

'Greed is good, greed is right, greed works, greed clarifies and cuts through, Greed captures the essence of the evolutionary spirit. Greed marks the upward surge of mankind ...and greed will save us.'

What Gordon Gecko forgot to tell his audience is that in the market place greed also keeps company with fear.

The present turmoil in the world's financial system is a case in point. Far from following rational economic laws like supply and demand or the principles of sound investment, the markets yield to human emotion. There is great power in the emotions of greed and fear. They lead to the human responses of bracing and hoarding and the depletion of the economic domain's vitality.

In Ezekiel the prophet rails against the shepherds of Israel. No, he is not attacking the shepherds union and its membership of isolated hill keepers of Israel's sheep. Shepherd is a code word for leaders who have everything from economic to political to prophetic and priestly power. Sheep is an image for the people who rely upon them.

"You shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! Should not the shepherds feed the sheep? You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with the wool. You slaughter the fatlings but you do not feed the sheep. You have not strengthened the weak, you have not healed the sick, you have not bound the injured, you have not brought back the strayed, you have not sought the lost, but with force and harshness you have ruled them.

So they were scattered, because there was no shepherd; and scattered they became food for all the wild animals." (Ezekiel 34)

The image of leadership feeding off those it is sworn to lead is a timeless indictment of Greed associated with negative power. We have seen it played out in our own lives. Vast profits made by banks and other financial institutions for well over decades, huge salaries and bonuses paid to corporate CEO's while their company's performance tank, intricate bundling of mortgage debt sold to investors that eventually brought the financial system down.

But greed is not just a powerful emotion among the wealthy. It pervades the whole of our society.

People with low incomes bought homes they could not afford. We are all pressured to live beyond our means.¹

Millions of us have lived too long on credit that is now being called in. We are susceptible to contagions of fear and scattered like sheep across a chaotic financial wilderness.

Greed and fear are powerful emotions that have powerful consequences. While they seek abundance they actually bind us to spiritual scarcity and corruption. When the Easter reading from Paul talks about the corruptible putting on the incorruptible it is not primarily about a resurrected body after death, it is about the raising up of new consciousness. He is talking about putting on the mind of the risen one. He is talking about the dynamics of repentance and letting go.

Remember the Greek word for repent is Metanoia. This word refers to more than an act of will to change our behavior. It goes deeper than that. It is literally talking about transformed consciousness. Going beyond our small mind where the egoic emotions hold sway. It is about discovering our true self's repository of love beyond fear, of grateful generosity beyond greed, of peace beyond anxiety.

It is about taking on an incorruptible way of being. The core meaning of corruption refers to a deviation from true purpose. People and systems eventually eat themselves up when they deviate from their true purpose. The resurrected life is characterized by union with our true essence, and unites us with the living presence of one who did not succumb to the corrupting forces around him. Like a good shepherd Jesus placed his very body (like a gate) between the sheep and the wild animals that would devour them. This is what he does for us.

Little wonder that Jesus spent the greater part of his ministry teaching about the proper attitudes towards egoic desire and anxiety. He knew that craving for possessions and the misplaced love of money roots our lives in corruption.

His wisdom is an antidote for the dominating emotions that shipwreck our lives. There is a sign on the New York Stock exchange that says; " One System, No limits." No where in Jesus teaching will you find such entitlements of unlimited growth and profit. He taught us to be satisfied with enough and to care for each other.

He modeled spiritual simplicity as a way of contentment and peace grounded in a deep sense of gratitude for what we have. His wisdom is a basis of a sustainable world and a sustainable inner life.

Christ our wisdom master presents love of God and love of neighbour as two sides of one coin. Indeed, he taught us to love our neighbour as our selves. Or to say it another way, you and your neighbour are one.

In as much as you do something loving or unloving to the least of his brothers or sisters you do it to him. This is love that the Good Shepherd holds for all the sheep, obedient and disobedient. It is a paradigm for leadership free of fear and full of loving service at personal expense.

¹ *Bishop Michael Ingham, Easter Message*

We are inclined to think of hate as the opposite of love but this is not biblical wisdom. Our tradition says that the opposite of love is fear. The first letter of John says, "There is no room for fear in love. Perfect love casts out fear." This is not to say that we can always be without fear and I would not want to promote an unreal view that denies our human situation and presents an either love or fear alternative. But love is the heart's power of union that helps us to face fear for what it is and provides a way beyond the surface self's attachments to the things we fear. Love takes the measure of our fears and lets them go so that we are no longer their slaves.

Love flows from the larger mind of the heart. We are actually hard wired for this deep love. To give and receive love with a sense of gratitude is of our essence. When we swerve from the path of love we are overtaken by powerful, fearful emotions that block us from living out of our true nature.

Mahatma Ghandi once said that if you are afraid of death you are not free. You are a slave to what you fear to lose. You can be bought. There is a price you will be prepared to pay to anyone or anything that promises you a different ending. This is why the smartest people can make colossal, foolish mistakes.

Love follows the way of sacrifice and surrender. This does not mean a way of weakness and collapse in the face of difficulty; quite the opposite!

A compassionate person is no doormat, content to let others wipe their feet all over them. A compassionate person is strong, ready to believe the best and not the worst, ready to give others a chance when the world will not.

Compassionate living is characterized by a consciousness of abundance, rather than scarcity and judgment. It carries on when the temptation is to quit. This is the core of faithful capital. It is not a slave to the tyrant of self-serving ends but remains faithful to Love's purpose even through death on a cross.

We can all hear the Gordon Geckos of this world with their gospels of Greed and Fear. There are many role models offered to us that would enslave us to a false self and its insatiable desires. The world is full of empty promises that play to our fears and our greed.

My friends I ask you to look to Jesus and the light in him that cannot be put out in the darkest of times.

"God took the sacrifice of Jesus and transformed it into victory over death. All the despair and tragedy of his dying were left upon the cross, and in their place a resurrection hope was born. Light began to shine where darkness had prevailed, and God showed again the sovereignty of love over fear...."

The Good Shepherd invites us to set aside the negative emotions that can drive so much of our lives. God is to be found in the light, in the hope and the confidence that enables us to act and live in the serenity of trust.

*There is a great deal of God's light in the world. The power of the risen Lord is undiminished by our current anxieties and gloom. There is a new life beyond each present crisis. Our faith is not in the marketplace, but in the living God."*²

² Bishop Michael Ingham, *Easter Message*