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"Greed is Good"

Rev. Paul D. Daniel, Minister

"Greed is good... greed is right, it works and captures the essence of evolution." Gordon Gekko told us that in the 1987 movie "Wall Street." Perhaps so; the rich are getting richer and richer, the middle class is squeezed and the poor just get poorer.

Greed and unfairness are embedded in the heart of American culture. From the current unfairness of three Wall Street Fund managers winning 230 million dollars on the lottery, and back 2800 years to the prophet Amos 8:4-6 who condemned the rich. "Hear this, you that trample on the needy, and bring ruin to the poor and, saying, 'we will practice deceit with false balances, buying the poor for silver and the needy for a pair of sandals, and selling only the husks of the wheat.'" Amos had the pulse of his time when he denounced the rich and powerful taking advantage of the innocent and the poor. Today we are out to the malls before the Thanksgiving dishes are put away, pepper spraying other shoppers to get to the bargains. Pathetic! A sad commentary on a society that has lost its moral compass.

Greed has overtaken our moral bearings and damaged our spiritual self-interest and communities. We run up our credit card with little regard for our indebtedness or the good of the nation. Something is very wrong with America's priorities. Our confidence in our financial and government institutions has been eroded by greed, money and unchecked usurious business practices. History repeats itself. Humankind has always struggled with right and wrong. None of us are free from at least one of the Seven Deadly Sins: pride, sloth, gluttony, envy, anger, lust, and greed, which lead to destructive personal temptation.

Aviad Kleinberg, an Israeli intellectual, asks as part of his examination of sin, "What is wrong with a little sloth? Where would haute cuisine be without gluttony? Where would we all be without our parents' lust? Has anger really gone out of style in the West? Can consumer culture survive without envy and greed? And with all humility, why shouldn't we be proud?"

Well, perhaps because Greed has caused a personal and societal meltdown. People in record numbers are unemployed. The wealth creators that politicians protect and shield from taxes are not creating jobs. This has led to foreclosures, diminished home values and bankruptcies, potentially creating a permanent underclass easily manipulated by the wealthy, such as the Koch brothers. Corporations and banks worldwide continue to fail yet

resist corrective regulation, all in the name of profit. Lending has stopped, which hinders the growth of business and depresses jobs growth. A comfortable retirement seems even more distant than ever.

Facing all this, fear and anxiety have taken over and destroyed our confidence in ourselves and in our society. We question our future; seek security where there is seemingly none. We turn our backs on the needy and think only of ourselves. We ignore the words of FDR that, "All we have to fear is fear itself." A mentality of scarcity has taken over, when what we need is the opposite. Thankfully, our faith calls us to hope, to love our neighbors as ourselves, to value the worth and dignity of all people regardless of financial status or class. Let us not forget we are all one body, and if this ship of state sinks, we all drown.

Cooperation is what is needed, working together for the common good. Elaine Aron reminds us of that in the story of "Chalice Soup". A woman weary of traveling from place to place, hungry from looking for work, knocks on the first house she sees. An old man answered the door. The traveler asked whether his family could spare some food for dinner.

The old man shook his head, "Times are very hard here and we certainly don't have enough to share with a stranger. Better keep moving on."

"That's fine," said the traveler. "I will just make myself some delicious 'chalice soup.'" The traveler pulled a large pot from her car and filled it with water from a nearby fountain. Right there in the middle of the street, she built a fire under the pot. Then she removed a small ceramic chalice from her purse and dropped it into the water.

"I certainly love my chalice soup," the traveler said in a loud voice. "It has a most delicious flavor. In fact, the only thing that could possibly make this soup taste better would be a head of cabbage. Of course, there is no hope of that in these difficult times." Suddenly, a little boy emerged from his house carrying a small head of cabbage. "Take this," said the boy. "All I ask is that you let me have a taste of your chalice soup."

"Of course!" cried the traveler as she dropped the cabbage into the pot. "In fact, I would be honored if your entire family ate with me. I am just sorry that I could not offer you chalice soup with beans. Now that is truly delicious!"

With that, a young mother approached the traveler and she was carrying a large can of beans. "Here," she said, placing the beans into the pot. "All I

ask is that you let my children eat some of your chalice soup." "Of course!" said the traveler. "But you must try it yourself. It is really wonderful."

And so it went -- through potatoes, onions, carrots, mushrooms, and so on - until all of the people from the neighborhood gathered around the pot. When the chalice soup was ready, there was enough delicious food for everyone. The people of the town struck up conversations with each other and were soon chatting and laughing as they had in earlier times. "What a miracle!" said the people, as they ate. "To think that such delicious soup could be made from a simple chalice!" When the traveler left, she gave the people her chalice as a gift.

The moral Aron shares is that people, overcome by fear, can still move into a sense of abundance through cooperation and generosity. When we share our resources we can, as in this story, end hunger. On a deeper level, "by bringing people together, the traveler cast out the petrifying forces of fear. When fear is cast out, people can stand side by side in community and get the emotional and spiritual sustenance that they really need. By fostering community, the traveler made room for love to take root and thrive. Making room for that love is at the core of our Universalist heritage."

We are called here at UUMAN to create a new era of love built on generosity and gratitude. Give something -- your treasure, your time, your energy, your soul -- to the hard work we are called to do. Give an abundance of love in the face of Greed that now pervades our culture. This love can change our world if we each offer love out of a generous heart.

Be mindful of the words of Isaiah 58:1-12, "Is not this the fast that I choose: to lose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, [and] to let the oppressed go free..?"

"Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin?..."

"If you remove the yoke from among you, the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil, if you offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted, then your light shall rise in the darkness, and your gloom be like the noonday... you shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to live in."

Kathleen McTigue echoes this in writing we are "witnessing a moral failure, a triumph of greed over goodness and of radical self-interest over the community". But we are not helpless in the face of this moral onslaught. As

a religious people, we can bring our UU values into the market place and byways of our political discourse. "Our religion has to do with what we hold to be of ultimate value. The purpose of our faith is to remind us again and again that we are children of Holiness, that there is more to our lives than buying and selling; that who we are and how we live matter. In times of crisis, what we do matters more than ever."

We can do some things. We can pay attention and demand that government and business become responsive to the public good, the needs of the 99%. That is what the Occupy movement and the Tea Party are seeking, but from different ends of the telescope. We must educate ourselves about the truth and falsehood of what we are told.

We cannot just forever grow an economy for its own sake. It must benefit people. We must stop buying instead of healing; stop spending at the cost of helping others; stop supporting greed at the expense of community. Do we ever question if this is good or bad for us? What do we lose when we ignore the human cost of greed?

Our souls, at the very least.

Jonathan Rowe, in "Our Phony Economy," elaborates: "The purpose of an economy is to meet human needs in such a way that life becomes in some respect richer and better in the process. It is not simply to produce a lot of stuff. Stuff is a means, not an end... We can't simply say that growth is good," with no measurement of what that means. The failure to do this is insane.

I want no part of this. I can't compete with something so global, nor do I want to. I can no longer ignore the harm we do to others in the name of profit. It makes me feel dirty. I feel whole only when I act and care for something besides myself.

What about you? Are you ready to live out our UU values of generosity, compassion and love for each other? I am betting you are, for it is not just those *others* who are in trouble—it's all of us—together we are all one strong body. Marilyn Sewell says, "We must gather in groups and tell one another about our fears for our own safety, about our loneliness and isolation, about the clutter in our lives. Only if we allow our hearts to speak, will we discover we are not alone. And with that knowledge comes the sense of community and caring that will support us on our journey to a better place." A better way.