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Season after Pentecost  
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### **Change My Brother!**

Colossians 3:1-11      *...you have stripped off the old self with its practices and have clothed yourselves with the new self...*

Luke 12:13-21      *And he said to them, "Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed, for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions."*

Someone in the crowd shouts out to Jesus, "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me." He wants Jesus to correct what he sees as a personal injustice. In essence, he wants Jesus to change someone else, in this case a brother, so that is the way he thinks he should be. He locates the cause of his suffering in his brother.

Jesus doesn't let himself get sucked in. "Who made me a judge or arbitrator over you?" Doesn't Jesus care about the tensions and conflicts that arise among us? Jesus sees something deeper. It doesn't concern just this man but is common to all of us. So Jesus addresses the whole crowd: "Beware! Be alert to all kinds of greed. Your life isn't made up of the you have." Then Jesus tells a parable. A parable is a story that lodges itself in our souls and makes us think deeply about our own lives. It isn't a riddle to solve or just a moral tale. A parable is designed to wake us up as we contemplate it.

A farmer has a good year. It is such a good year that his barns won't hold the overflowing harvest. So he builds bigger barns. All the time, he mumbles to himself, "Soul, now you have it made! You can relax, take it easy. You are fixed for life." But suddenly God steps in and tells him, "This very night your life is being demanded of you." What does this mean? Maybe that he is going to die right then and there. Maybe he is being called to account for his life, what he has really made of it. What does it matter that his barns are bulging with grain? Nothing. What really matters is whether or not, as Jesus says, our lives are rich toward God, whether or not we are living a truly full and meaningful life. True security has to do with nothing other than our relationship with God, our love of God, and our lives being lived out of that center.

I think about this in relation to our current obsession as a nation with national security and the military. Every political speech harps on it. As I listened to the various speeches at the Democratic convention, it seemed that the most vigorous responses came not to the obsessive promises regarding that kind of security. They came when a few speakers dared speak about the needs of people—health care, employment, education for all children, tolerance and respect among people, and so forth. True security has nothing to do with our sinful expenditures on and use of military armaments. It has to do whether there is real justice in a society, whether people are being lifted up, cared for, and respected. The biblical vision of God's *shalom* in the Hebrew prophets and in Jesus' proclaiming of God's kingdom has to do with just that kind of true security.

What Jesus saw in that man was greed. The real problem was not his brother. If Jesus stepped in and made his brother give him his share of the inheritance, nothing deep and real would be solved. This man would still be captive to his own spiritual disability. Beware of all kinds of greed, says Jesus to all the people. All kinds of greed. Greed is not just about material possessions, though it is certainly about that. It is about a spiritual orientation that is centered on the self. The man wanted his brother to change. Then he would be happy. Then his suffering would end. Greed, which is an attitude toward possessions and life itself, believes that we will be happy when other people and life around us are changed to suit us. I think there are a good number of times when we share this man's plea to Jesus: Change my brother or sister! Change this other person who is so irritating or troublesome! Change this lousy world so it is the way I think it should be! Then I will be happy. Then I will not suffer. That is a broader definition of greed. It is simply life that is centered on our own desires for way we think other people and the world itself should be.

But Jesus turns it around. Though he speaks to the crowd, Jesus' answer to the man is essentially this: I will not change your brother to suit you. But I will help you change in relationship to your brother and to life itself. This man's response to his brother reveals something important about himself, something that is causing him real spiritual pain and keeping him from true life. That is why Jesus tells his parable about the rich farmer. What is most crucial for our lives is not the kind of security that comes from material or any other kind of possessions. It is the kind of security that comes from living as closely to God as we can. It is the freedom from anxiety and fear that is rooted in love and trust of God. It is the joy that arises when we are liberated

from self-concern. This is why Paul in his words to the Colossian Christians calls greed a form of idolatry. It is whatever stands between us and God.

It is true that our responses to others reveal more about ourselves than the other person. What we see and respond to in others—their greed, their hate, their fear, their insecurities, and so forth—arises from those very things in ourselves. That is why people like Mohandas Gandhi and Jesus himself understood and taught that in order to overcome violence, greed, hate, and injustice in the world we must be recognizing and overcoming those things in ourselves. And that is why the inward journey of prayer, reflection, self-examination, and personal transformation, is so crucial to the life of faith. It is crucial because there needs to be a consistency between what we value and work for in the world and who we are as persons. It is even more crucial because Jesus wants us each to experience fully the life that he offers. It is the new life of those who are reborn in God's own love.

Paul's words to the Colossian church talk about the same thing. We have died with Christ and we have been raised with Christ to a new life. The old self, the self that is centered on itself, is dead, gone. The new self that is centered and immersed in God has been born in us. But the struggle is not over. We need to keep working with this old life and this new life. There are lingering aspects of the old life that need our attention and awareness. They keep cropping back up. Just when we think we are so loving, so forgiving, so non-violence, so full of God's purposes, just when we think we are cruising along the path of discipleship to Jesus, someone or something comes into our circle of living and trips us up. The anger, the fear, the jealousy, the judgmentalism rise up in us again. And we at first think it is this other person or this circumstance that needs to be changed. I think that everyone and everything that comes into our lives does so to teach us something important about ourselves. And if we can receive these persons and experiences into our spiritual lives and discover what they are teaching us, we will find that the real answer is not in the change that happens around us but the change that happens within us. When we are really engaged in that kind of transformative spiritual life, when true, deep love, when true peacefulness, when true forgiveness and compassion are being formed in us, then we are people who foster change in others and the world.

It is not that other people don't need to be changed. It is not that the world doesn't desperately need to be changed. True spiritual living is not focusing on our own spiritual lives without engaging in

some ministry, some work to which we feel God has called us and for which God has gifted us. Our inward turning, if it is humble and seeking new life, will not be passive and a withdrawal from life. If I am being transformed daily by God's spirit and love, if I am discovering and affirming the Christ who is in me through a deep commitment to the inward journey of my own transformation, then I will not fail to meet the Christ who then calls me to follow him into specific ways of serving others and the world. Then I will not fail to encounter the God who calls me to participate in the birth of *shalom* in the world and shows me my particular place in it.

We Christians talk about the "old self" and the "new self." We talk about "dying with Christ" and "being raised with Christ." This is very important language, and very powerful. It can be easily misunderstood. The death of the old self, the greedy self, the self that is centered on itself, is not an erasing of our identities or personalities. It must not be seen as any kind of hatred of ourselves. The new self is our truest self, the way we are made by God. This new self is connected to God and to life in an open, free, and loving way. The man in the crowd that day? We don't know what happened to him. We don't know what he did with Jesus' teaching. But he was at an important juncture in his life. He could remain the prisoner of conflicts and expectations and demands related to his brother and to life around him. Or he could look deeply within himself, come to a greater understanding, and turn toward this new life of true security, freedom, and joy. When we make that turning in our own lives, when we work with the birth of this new self within us, then we discover, I think, what Paul is talking about when he says, "In that renewal there is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free, but Christ is all and in all." This is the new humanity, our true humanity.