

“Dead to the Death Cult”

Luke 12:13-21; Hosea 11:1-11; Colossians 3:1-11 – Rev. Rebecca Littlejohn
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Holy God, bless the speaking and the hearing of these words, that our hearts might be transformed by your love and freed from all greed and selfishness. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Have you ever been in a cult? Or known anyone who was in a cult? It's a funny word, “cult,” because it's one of those words that is almost always about someone else, isn't it? Even though the most basic definition of “cult” is “a particular system of religious worship, especially with reference to its rites and ceremonies” – which arguably could apply to what we're doing here right now – we would never use that word to refer to ourselves. To call something a “cult” almost always implies something bad, something extreme, something that doesn't make sense and is probably damaging. A “cult” is something people need help to escape, an unhealthy community you need to quit cold turkey.

I think that's why the term “death cult” is what came into my mind when I was reading this passage from Colossians earlier this week. That's what Paul is describing: there is this way of life that involves violence and exploitation, and because your life is now in Christ, you are dead to that life. You are dead to the death cult. Hallelujah! But Paul knows how hard it is to exit a cult, so he's encouraging the Colossians to stay strong, to keep their eyes on Christ, so that they are not pulled back into that old life.

At first glance, this passage from Paul may not seem like it has much connection to the other two scripture lessons we read this morning. But there is a common thread here, and the way they connect can help us understand each of them better. The connection is actually tucked into the middle of these verses from Colossians, at the end of verse five. That list of things we are called to put to death within ourselves concludes with greed, and then there is that parenthetical explanation that reminds us that greed is, at root, idolatry. It's a powerful teaching. Idolatry means to worship – that is, to put our trust in – something other than God. Greed is when we put our trust in and thereby worship wealth. The other things listed before greed – fornication, impurity, passion, and evil desire – can be summed up as exploitation, or greed as applied to other people instead of money or things.

Greed can take on another form of idolatry as well, which we see illustrated in the parable of the Rich Fool we read from Luke. Have you ever heard of such a self-satisfied man? “Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry!” The fact that it never occurs to this man to share his blessings speaks to his sense that he has earned them all. The way the story is told however reminds us of the truth. It doesn't say he worked hard to grow all those crops; it says “the land produced abundantly.” The land and the sun and the rain, all of which were created by God. And greed as exploitation is present here as well: Do you think he picked all those crops himself? Do you think he's the one who will be building the bigger barn?

Even more telling, this parable is Jesus' response to a demand that he get involved in the distribution of someone's inheritance. The whole set-up of the narrative is a reminder that our blessings come from God, not from ourselves. To be greedy with them is to steal from God and God's creation. To be confident because of your riches is to confess that your security lies in what you have accumulated, that your trust is in wealth rather than God. "Be on your guard against all kinds of greed," Jesus said, even if you think you deserve what you have, and maybe especially then.

The passage we read from Hosea does not talk about greed directly at all. But it does talk about idolatry. And it does make clear, when God says "they shall return to the land of Egypt," that idolatry is what happens when our trust in God falters. That was a reference to the moments when the Israelites were wandering in the desert, hungry and thirsty, and growing nostalgic for the food and drink they had back when they were slaves. This helps us understand idolatry better, and it helps us understand greed better too. I would argue that greed is rooted in fear. We hoard because we are afraid of what might happen if we run out. That rich man didn't want to share because he wanted to be able to finally relax. But even if he hadn't been visited by the Angel of Death that night, do you think he really would have relaxed? There's a quote from "The Grapes of Wrath" that's been floating around my Facebook feed this week. Steinbeck wrote: "If he needs a million acres to make him feel rich, seems to me he needs it 'cause he feels awful poor inside hisself, and if he's

poor in hisself, there ain't no million acres gonna make him feel rich." The character who said this, Jim Casy, understood that wealth is a false god. And this is always the case with idolatry. Those false gods – whether wealth or health or self – are hollow, unable to keep the promises we convinced ourselves they made to us. They are merely constructs that emerge to take advantage of our fear.

When these constructs are manipulated and magnified by others, they become a whole other structure of belief and practice, a cult, if you will, complete with exploitation, fear-mongering, and empty promises. They are not merely idolatrous; they are dangerous. And Christ does call us to refuse to give them life. The language Paul uses in Colossians about “putting to death” such things can feel extreme and violent in its own way. And that’s why I think the passage we read from Hosea can be so helpful. So often, we bandy about the stereotype of the wrathful “Old Testament” God in contrast to the loving and merciful “New Testament” God. Well, today’s lessons put the lie to that generalization! It’s the God in Jesus’ story who derides the rich man as a fool. Whereas this testimony of compassion from Hosea almost makes your heart break! “I was to them like those who lift infants to their cheek.” “It was I who taught Ephraim to walk.” “My compassion grows warm and tender.” “For I am God and no mortal, the Holy One in your midst, and I will not come in wrath.” Whatever we thought we knew about God and wrath, or about how God deals with idolatry, or about how God wants us to deal with idolatry, we need to take a breath

here, and soak up the love. As Paul puts it later in Colossians, the way to resist idolatry is to “clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.”

If greed is idolatry (which it is), and idolatry is rooted in fear (which it is), and love is the opposite of fear (which it is), then it stands to reason that love is the solution to greed. Love is both the opposite and the antidote to greed and every other form of idolatry. Love is how we become dead to the death cult. Love is how we resist the siren call of fear-mongering, so that we can truly love all our neighbors. Love is how we learn to trust in God, rather than security measures or investment accounts or surveillance. Paul was not writing to us here in the 21st century, but the death cult he encouraged the Colossians to resist is just as present now as it was in his day. Be people of Christ, he said. Tell the truth. Refuse to exploit others. Stop hoarding your blessings. Place your trust in God alone. You can leave that cult behind. It was false and empty anyway. God’s tender love for you is enough. God’s generous mercy is enough. God’s faithfulness is enough. Hallelujah and Amen.