

Mine! Mine! Mine!

A sermon by Jackie Clement

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My husband and I have been making a home together for now over three decades, and ours is a Unitarian Universalist household. We gather according to the principles of voluntary association and live by covenant rather than by doctrine or creed. In fact, we have only one rule, a consequence of living with cats. Passed into legislation in the 1980s, it stands as originally drafted: me, me, me, it's all about me, my couch, my blanket. I know this violates the earliest lessons we receive as children about sharing our toys and our popsicles, but I think it nicely sums up a perspective on the world shared by cats, three-year-olds and multi-national corporations.

It's a view of the world that arises out of uncertainty, a fear that there is not enough couch or blanket to envelope everyone so we have to make sure to establish our claim on as much of it as we can, and preferably the entire couch/blanket combo. Charles Eisenstein, the author of *Sacred Economics* and the speaker in the video we saw earlier, calls it a perception of scarcity. I would call it a theology of scarcity.

There's a story in the Hindu tradition that I think illustrates the theology of scarcity just beautifully. It's one of my favorite religious wisdom stories. One night, Lord Krishna went into the forest and began to play celestial music on his flute. Dropping everything, the gopis, the local milk maids, rushed from their homes to find the beautiful music and to worship Krishna. As they encountered him, each gopi became convinced that he loved *her* more than the rest, that he was there *only* for her. As the gopis became more and more convinced of their uniqueness in the eyes of Krishna they became possessive, grasping after the god as if he were hers alone. With this Krishna suddenly—simply—disappeared.

Krishna was not a trickster or a charlatan making the gopis fall in love with him and then abandoning them. It was their grasping after a divinity that belonged to everyone that caused divinity to evaporate. In their greed to be the one and only, to remove everyone else from the holy presence, they erased the sacred. There was enough divine love for everyone, but no one wanted to share. Each one was so certain that they alone had the right to be by Krishna's side that they all ended up alone.

This story demonstrates that greed is not only about material goods. We are also greedy with love and attention and capital 'T' Truth. We are greedy with things that have no scarcity point. The fish may not be so thick you can walk across the rivers and piles of apples may not cover the landscape, but there is no limit to love; there is not one truth only for all people; we can have our experience of the divine *and* allow other people to have theirs without it diminishing ours. The video talked about this mentality of scarcity in terms of material goods, natural resources and especially money, but, as the story of the gopis says so well, it goes beyond the material to the things of the spirit.

The video also said that this mentality of scarcity is the source of greed. In Eisenstein's words, "Greed is a consequence of scarcity." Perhaps, in a way, but I don't think greed is a consequence of the scarcity of *money*, or whatever material goods money points to. Certainly people do experience scarcity in our society. There are plenty of folks here in Bloomington-Normal who do not have enough to eat, do not have the money they need to meet financial obligations or obtain healthcare. There are too many people (one being too many by my definition), too many people who do not have a home. This is a realistic perception of need. Greed, on the other hand, is an unrealistic perception based in desire, or, I believe, a need for something *other than* the desired material good. Greed, I believe, is a consequence of the scarcity of connection.

Rather than being based in the desire for money or cars or more food or more shopping time, I see greed as based in the need for more belonging, more worthwhile connection to other human beings and more connection to God. We have emotional, psychological and physical needs that impel us into connections with other human beings and we have spiritual needs that impel us into relationship with God. Now, I know that we have many conceptions of God here, and some find the very word irrelevant, but we each still have a ground of ultimate being, something in which we base our understanding of the world and disconnection from that sacred understanding leaves a hole no amount of money can fill. Disconnection from that ground of our being gives rise to greed as we try to apply material bandages to spiritual wounds.

Charles Eisenstein talks about it as beauty. In "The More Beautiful World Our Heart Knows Is Possible," he writes this:

How much of the ugly does it take to substitute for a lack of the beautiful? How many adventure films does it take to compensate for a lack of adventure? How many superhero movies must one watch, to compensate for the atrophied expression of one's greatness? How much pornography to meet the need for intimacy? How much entertainment to substitute for missing play? It takes an infinite amount. That's good news for economic growth, but bad news for the planet.

So I think, in a way, the gopis were right. They sought deeper connection to God. Where things went wrong was that their desire to be connected to the divine blinded them to the fact that others had that need, too. In their hubris they thought only they could have their need fulfilled. But, still, they desired a deeper connection with their sense of the sacred, a basic human need we all share. All our grasping after stuff is a warning sign that we are living in a state of separation.

So what do we do about separation? What do we do if we recognize that our desire for more stuff, more entertainment, more food or risk or thrill or sex isn't about wanting that at all, but about filling another need, a need for connection? How do we move from a theology of scarcity to a theology of abundance when we know that theology might be an intellectual process but living it is something altogether different?

One of the very compelling answers I've found comes from the work of Buddhist monk, Thich Nhat Hanh. This morning's reading alluded to it briefly. It is the idea of interbeing. The concept is well grounded in Buddhism, not unique to Nhat Hanh, though he coined the term interbeing to describe the fundamental and inherent interconnectedness of all things. It is almost what we point to in our UU principles when we affirm our respect for the interconnected web of all

existence of which are a part. Interbeing, however, says that it is an illusion that we are a *part* of the web, when we are, in fact, the web itself—one and indistinguishable from. We are, each of us, the other *and* the whole. Inseparable, we do not exist as discrete selves. In the reading, Thich Nhat Hanh talked about this concept of interbeing. Here is what he offers in his book *How to Love* about the effect of interbeing on human relationships.

Often, when we say, “I love you” we focus mostly on the idea of the “I” who is doing the loving and less on the quality of the love that’s being offered. This is because we are caught by the idea of self. We think we have a self. But there is no such thing as an individual separate self... We can’t exist by ourselves alone. We can only inter-be. I am made only of non-me elements, such as the Earth, the sun, parents, and ancestors. In a relationship, if you can see the nature of interbeing between you and the other person, you can see that his suffering is your own suffering, and your happiness is his own happiness. With this way of seeing, you speak and act differently. This in itself can relieve so much suffering.

So, as it turns out, it really is all about me and it is my couch and my blanket but *equally* it is all about you and it is your couch and your blanket. To live with a perspective of interbeing fundamentally changes the nature of our relationships. No longer is it you for or against me. No longer can I sit in judgment of that greedy person without indicting myself. Interbeing shifts our perception of greed from one of the seven deadly sins to a symptom of disconnection. Greed, then, is not some physical cloud of evil in the world, embodied by some (the “bad”) and eschewed by others (the “good”). It is not something that must be eradicated from the world by fighting against those who are “bad.” It is not something that must be eradicated from our own impulses by fighting against the “bad” part of ourselves.

Greed, then, is a symptom of suffering. Perhaps thinking of greed in this way will allow us to oppose policies and systems and impulses of greed without increasing the divisiveness in the world. In a compassionate society we do not put those who are suffering outside the city walls to die alone. We do not treat separation by increasing distance. We do not cut off parts of ourselves because they are trying to signal that we need to attend to the ground of our being more closely. In a compassionate society we embrace those who suffer from separation, we embrace those parts of ourselves that suffer from separation.

This way of looking at greed reminds me of a segment I heard on NPR a couple years ago. It talked about the over-use of painkillers, and it wasn’t just about addiction to narcotics. It also counseled against how us regular, out of shape types will take a couple of ibuprofen before launching into an unusually large physical task trying to head off the aches and pains that we know will result. With a sort of “befriend your pain” perspective, they talked about how pain is both a symptom of something going wrong and a signal that you should do something about it, like stop trying to lift that 200 pound carton or spend some time getting in better shape. Masking the pain before you have a chance to understand what is causing it can result in more harm. When your tooth aches, a diagnostic visit to the dentist is sometimes a more effective long term strategy than Motrin.

It is the same thing with befriending our impulses to greed (or anger or sloth or pride or any of the other supposedly seven deadly sins). Impulses of wanting what we don't need, beyond any justification, are symptoms of underlying pain somewhere in the system. If we are attentive, those impulses can offer us important information about what is really lacking, about ways we might not even see that we are suffering, about our dislocation and disconnection. That is not "bad" or "evil" or to be punished. It is to be heeded, for we cannot heal the wounds we do not know we have.

The concept of interbeing gives us a way to begin. By seeing ourselves as already fully connected to all humanity, to all that makes up our universe, to the infinite mystery, we take the first step in calming our fears of scarcity. We move toward healing by setting aside ancient ideas of a disembodied evil we must fight against and instead offer compassion for the pain carried in all hearts. We move toward happiness and flourishing through understanding, through compassion, through connection. As Thich Nhat Hanh writes, "If you have enough understanding and love, then every moment — whether it's spent making breakfast, driving the car, watering the garden, or doing anything else in your day — can be a moment of joy."

There is more to the story of the gopis. When Krishna saw their pain at losing him and felt the depth of their longing for sacred connection, he returned to the gopis, and they began to dance. As they danced, Krishna multiplied himself so that each gopi had a Krishna to dance with. And in their joy of divine connection the gopis and the dance grew in beauty until the sky was filled with the gods who had come to watch such a spectacle. Rhythm and swirling color combined in such joy that all thought was lost for worldly matters of who was best dressed, whose makeup most perfectly done, whose jewelry was the finest. In the achievement of connection with the ground of their being the gopis were fulfilled.

May it be a dance we do.

Namaste. Por lo tanto puede ser.

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