

RCL YEAR A, Pentecost 2, Proper 3, May 25th, 2008, Memorial Day Weekend
 Isaiah 49:8-16a (omitted); Psalm 131; 1 Corinthians 4:1-5; St. Matthew 6: 24-34
 St. Edmund's Episcopal Church
 The Reverend George F. Woodward III

"Case closed on a deadly day at market," ran a banner story in Thursday's LA Times, and thinking that this was a story about finance, I began to read...until I realized it was about the senior citizen who drove his car into a crowd some years ago in Santa Monica. I tend to read financial stories in the paper because they often seem to have some direct impact on my life. *"Money woes tied to Minnesota bridge collapse"* read another headline further into the same day's paper. Money woes undermine quality of life in all manner of ways, while financial prosperity leads to enhanced opportunity, and so I know that I am not alone in my interest in and concern over money.

So when I read today's Gospel wherein Jesus says: "You cannot serve both God and wealth," I wonder how I should understand this teaching, and in what ways I am intended to be challenged.

We hear the teaching against our own social background. America entered the industrial age with gusto following the civil war, and, together with England, became the cradle of urgent capitalism. Capitalism has served us well. Indeed, since World War I something like twenty-five nations have successfully re-ordered their economies along the lines of modern capitalism, and every one of those nations have eliminated material poverty as a significant problem. No other system of economic organization can make such a boast, and certainly not socialism, the well-intended and utterly failed alternative twentieth century dogma.

Nor are we likely to be convinced by an appeal to God's provision for the birds of the air. People who flutter through life with no thought for tomorrow are irresponsible people, and in many parts of the world people go to bed hungry despite exercising more industriousness than many an American, the victims of failed government and social systems. One or two Lehrer reports on the starving children of Sudan pretty much shoots down the "birds of the air" theory of provision.

Yet over 450 separate biblical passages deal with the subject of money. Jesus spoke more often about money than He did about the afterlife, about sexual morality, or violence, with one-sixth of Gospel passages devoted to the subject. The Spirit seems to have a word or two to say to us about the dangers of money, and it's proper place in a Christian life.

The Aramaic word "mammon" which Jesus uses in the Gospel has as its root meaning *"that in which you put your trust."* That which we ultimately value, that which dominates our waking thoughts, that with which we identify, may be said to master us. We attend to those things we most value in a way that sidelines other concerns. Jesus seems to say that if we seek money as the foundation for our security, then a proper focus on God will become secondary, vague and illusive, next to the soothing value of hard cash.

Truth be told, Jesus may have a legitimate critique. Many Americans, and no doubt many in our parish, pursue material wealth in a manner that sidelines what Jesus held to be our first focus and commitment to God. Not many limit themselves or complain about a work week well over forty hours, but an hour and a half in church once

a week is often said to be too much. Jesus is endlessly trying to liberate us from life's secondary concerns and to focus our hearts and minds on what really matters so that our lives may assume proper balance and proportion, and I imagine this is a message we are in need of hearing. If, as Jesus said, you cannot serve both God and wealth, then we may be in trouble. We would like to think that we serve God, but by Christ's measure, our priorities and our way of life betray another allegiance. Maybe the best that can be said is that we live between two Altars, running back and forth between the Altar of Mammon and the Altar of Yahweh.

The richest man of his time, John D. Rockefeller, was once asked how much money is enough. He responded with the perfect definition of greed: "Just a little bit more!" He isn't alone. A recent poll found that Americans making between \$35,000 and \$200,000 annually think they would be happy if they only had \$50,000 more coming in each year, and looking into my own dark and greedy heart, I'd have to say that sounds about right to me!

Yet studies confirm that a person's sense of well-being doesn't proportionally increase along with material wealth. Once you have attained the median national income, income makes no difference to your happiness or mental health until you are in the upper percentages, when happiness seems actually to decline. Jesus' argument for proportion suddenly seems more compelling. As the author of Ecclesiastes concluded long ago, money alone just can't satisfy the most fundamental longings of the soul.

Although our text presents God and money as an either or proposition, this may be a case underscoring Jesus' penchant for hyperbole. God and money can be integrated into a Christian life, but only, taking Jesus' point, if God is the master.

In my own life this has meant being clear about my priorities, re-examining those priorities, and trying to be smart and intentional in my choices. A couple of years ago I sat across a table from a financial planner who said, "*You need to make more money, and you need to save more.*" Financial concerns needed to assume a higher place in my hierarchy of concerns, I was told. Yet, my chosen vocation doesn't leave me much room for extra-curricular money making. Even as I took the financial planner's words to heart, my freedom for what I believe to be my calling and commitment means I need to heed spiritual counsel which cuts the other way. There are limits to what money can do, and at the end of my life I want to have dedicated myself to something other than establishing my own security.

It is possible to feel as though one never has enough, and to devote so much time thinking about the getting of gain that the really important things of life are pushed to the sidelines. Once money is the master, it is hard to step off the path. Theologians call this "concupiscence." Concupiscence is substituting the pursuit of God and God's values with greed and the power, prestige and position that money can bring.

And so Jesus' many parables try to pull us back from concupiscence to an integrated understanding of the use of money. In one parable a farmer is so taken up with harvesting his grain and building ever bigger barns and silos that he fails to nurture a relationship with God right up to the day when his soul is required of him. In another, the poor man Lazarus languishes at the rich man's gate. If the rich man could only have recognized and tended to Lazarus' need he would have saved his own soul, but he does not even notice Lazarus because of his blinding self-interest. If we are caught up in self-provision and self care, it is only natural that we will become less aware of others and

their needs, not because of any intentional callousness, but because there is so little time to attend to anything other than building our own security. That way leads to judgment.

We can instead claim again the Lord's Prayer as a prayer of dependence on God for daily provision; hold fast to the teaching to give alms, to invite the poor to dinner, or at least to invite those who cannot further our economic well-being, to follow the example of the Samaritan who met the needs of another out of compassion, and of the poor widow who donated all that she had. These parables counsel us in the wisdom of proportion.

A choice is present to those of us who live between two Altars today; a choice between making God or Mammon our master. You can't do both. The choice is fundamentally about how you will define the meaning of your life. Will you understand and inhabit your life as an anxious quest for security and for the comfort and power possessions may bring? Or will you understand and inhabit your life as a gift sustained by God beyond any of your efforts to secure it, and to be used in service to God and others.

As so often in Scripture, captivity to the values of the world ends in slavery, and captivity to God and the values of the Kingdom lead to freedom. Money and material goods are only tools. As soon as we trust and hope in them, we are possessed by them, and once so possessed, we dispossess ourselves of God. This is not good for us. It does not bring us the fullness of life which God wants for those who love Him. It is not the purpose for which we were created, and it is not the calling we have received from Christ.

We cannot serve both wealth and God, for only one will win the heart. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and mind and strength and all manner of things will find their right proportion. It is all a matter of trust, and we are those who trust in God, and God alone. Amen. GFW+