

Amos 8:4-12
Psalm 138
1 Timothy 2:1-8
LUKE 16:1-13

Sermon – September 23, 2007

Who – or What – Do We Value Most?

Today's Gospel includes what, on the face of it, has to rank as one of the strangest, most unusual and easily misinterpreted of Jesus' stories. He tells of a rich man who had a dishonest manager who, when he found out he was about to be audited, went to the rich man's debtors to "adjust" their bills (downward) – "and the master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly."

What up with this? Is Jesus commending untrustworthy middle managers? Is Jesus saying this man's "CYA" approach is to be emulated?

Not at all. This is a story which gets our attention because it is so unexpected. Now, scholars say that the dishonest manager may simply have been knocking off his own personal bribe or mark-up from the bills he had previously given to his boss' debtors and changing the bills to what they should have been all along; remember, he's referred to as a dishonest manager based on the bills tendered before the audit.

Accurate as that might be in historical context, even that misses the point. The rich man commends his dishonest manager for his *shrewdness* in accordance with the values the manager has: to take care of his longer-term financial future by indebting some of the creditors to him so he'll have some place to go after he gets fired, rather than just pocketing an immediate payday with no prospects for the future. By the dishonest manager's value system – me and my money first, to heck with honesty – he was shrewd and smart.

Jesus says, "The children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light." Translation: dishonest money-grubbers know how to make their values work for them better than good Christians do. So, good Christians, or those who want to try to be good Christians (aka "children of light") should be just as shrewd – street-smart, flexible, and willing to think long-term – in living out our values as the dishonest money-grubbers are at living out theirs. Now does this story make sense?

Jesus' larger point is about values themselves. What are the values we actually live by and implement in our day-to-day, year-to-year lives, when we're making decisions about how we spend our time and our money? In Jesus' days on earth he found a lot of people for whom their own self-promotion was their #1 value, often with money, fame or power as the objectives.

Somehow, I think not too much has really changed in 2,000 years. As a C.P.A. once told me when we were talking about "sins", "The one I see most often is greed."

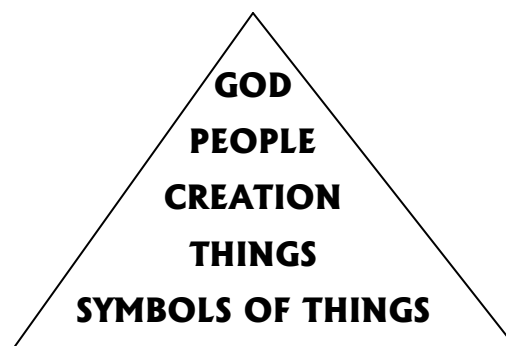
Values decisions do not always come clearly labeled; sometimes they are murky (or we like to think they are murky). In any case we need to have a set of values to apply to decisions, a hierarchy of values in rank order. And yes, this includes in making financial decisions. Today's Gospel is just one of many passages that concentrates on money: one-sixth of all Jesus' words as

recorded in the New Testament and one-third of all of his parables focus on our relationship with our possessions, more than he talked about heaven and hell and the sacraments combined. Do we possess our possessions, or do they possess us? Uncomfortable yet? Me too. So let's walk this road together.

I've heard it said that the shortest summary of Christian social ethics is "**Love people and use things.**" That sounds pretty simple and obvious...but have you ever had a boss at work who *loved things and used people*?

I had one once, many years ago before I went to seminary. It wasn't fun having him as a boss. Maybe you've had an experience like that, too.

Such a boss is an example of a person with an upside down values system. Now it's time for "show and tell" (I bring out a pyramid-shaped sheet.) Here is a hierarchy of values in proper rank order by Christian thinking as I understand it.



At the top (surprise) is **God**: our Supreme value, the one who we should value more than anyone or anything else, the only one we should worship and center our lives around. Anyone or anything else will let us down sooner or later. God is our Creator, our Redeemer, the one who offers to guide us, strengthen us and make us holy; our ultimate Judge and the only one who can offer us eternal life. God is our ultimate value, our ultimate destination, our ultimate "end." It is not accidental that Jesus said that the Greatest Commandment is, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind and with all your strength."

And Jesus said that the second greatest commandment is, "Love your neighbor as yourself." So...next in our hierarchy of values is **people**. Surprise. Those near and dear to us, of course, but everyone else, too. Jesus broadened the concept of "neighbor" exponentially. *People have intrinsic value* – not as much as God, but more so than other recipients of our love. People are all "made in the image of God" and are the pinnacle of Creation as designed by God, which leads us next to **Creation**. The rest of life also has value – more than inanimate objects, less than people and far less than God: we do not worship Nature, but we are called to be good stewards of the creation and are responsible to God for our care of it.

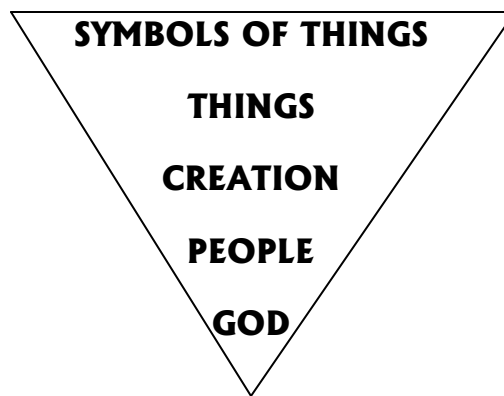
Next down the list are "things", inanimate objects. And finally, there are "symbols of things," like this \$20 bill, which is almost worthless *in and of itself* – it's only worth something because someone will give me something I want – food, gasoline, movie tickets or whatever – in *exchange* for it.

Symbols of things are tools we use to get things; they are means to an end, *not* ends in themselves according to Christianity. Money itself is *not* bad: the Bible says that “the *love* of money is the root of all evil,” not money itself.

We can, for example, use money to buy tools to build an environmentally friendly house in partnership with a Habitat for Humanity family to glorify God by showing our love of neighbor. That’s an example of the hierarchy of values working in the right direction: upwards from those with the least intrinsic value towards those with more or most intrinsic value.

This is not always easy, but at St. Barnabas we are trying to do this more and more: to use our routine spending as a church to reflect our values whenever possible, what I call “Total Stewardship.” We buy toilet paper and paper towels made from recycled paper, drink Fair Trade coffee which gives a living wage to those who pick the coffee beans and contributes to Episcopal Relief and Development, and as of our next meter reading are getting our church’s electricity from one of PSE&G’s “Green Power” renewable energy vendors.

Life is messy and this can be hard, and often people have to make hard choices between competing worthwhile values, but I am oversimplifying life a bit in this sermon to try to explain how this hierarchy of values can work in practice – and what happens if you turn it upside down [another pyramid with the items in reverse order].



In this hierarchy of values, you can see that “symbols of things” are at the top as the supreme value, things are second, the Creation is third, people are fourth, and God (if thought of at all) is last. Under this hierarchy of values, God (if thought of at all) is seen as a tool to get what we value most...under this scheme, money.

Janis Joplin parodied this approach a generation ago when she sang, “O Lord, won’t you buy me a Mercedes Benz.” Well, sad to say, there are preachers alive who can’t be parodied because they are their own parody. They peddle the “get rich by God” Gospel, which has about as much to do with the preacher from Nazareth who died penniless on a cross as, say, the toy manufacturers in China who sell trinkets so high in lead they could poison children.

It’s pretty clear what hierarchy of values is operational in an atheistic Communist dictatorship bent on making as much money as fast as possible at whatever cost to its own

environment and the health of its own workers – never mind the health of the people that buy their stuff. Toothpaste, anyone?

In their hierarchy of values, God disappears, people are at the bottom as tools, the Creation is also a tool to make things with the ultimate objective and value being...money.

And those business people in China are awfully good at implementing their values. It's been done before – 19th Century America was pretty much unregulated capitalism at a ferocious level – and yes, there are many other examples of this value system in the world; Chinese manufacturing just is fresh in our minds thanks to all the headlines. In fact, I think it's a measure of how broken and sinful our world is that the “upside down” value system is a lot more prevalent and powerful than the “right side up” one and “teaser” rates – an upside down hierarchy of values.

Thank God, God has given us an instruction book for life. Love God first and people second. It's simple – which doesn't mean it's easy. Often, it's not. That's why people who really want to be Christians really need to gather together in churches where we at least try to stumble in the right direction – together admit that we mess up and need God's help again and again, and try again. And where we try to glimpse what the world might look like if the hierarchy of values were right side up.

Maybe...the hungry would be fed, the homeless would find shelter, survivors of domestic violence would find safety, self-dependence and new homes, addicts would turn their wills over to God-as-they-understand-God and begin to recover, and racism would melt away as people warmed up to embracing each other fully and equally as children of God. Those are some of the things this congregation glimpses as part of God's dream for the world. And people giving generously to make possible reverent and enthusiastic worship in a beautiful church where we remember that God is God and we're not is also part of that. Maybe cherishing *every* person, whatever their age, income, education, national origin, sexual orientation, native language, ability or disability is part of that dream too.

What we know for sure is what Jesus tells us: either God has to be at the top of our hierarchy of values, or money. We can't have it both ways. We have to choose which is first.

As one of the knights said to Indiana Jones as he tried to identify the Holy Grail in the movie “Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade”, “Choose wisely.”

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