

Exodus 16:2-15  
Psalm 105:1-6,37-45  
Philippians 1:21-30  
MATTHEW 20:1-16

## **You Are Priceless to God. No Matter What.**

“Grant us, Lord, not to be anxious about earthly things, but to love things heavenly; and even now, while we are placed among things that are passing away, to hold fast to those that shall endure; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.” Amen.

I repeated the Collect for the Day just now because this prayer – assigned by the Prayer Book for today, not chosen specially by me – is particularly appropriate and necessary right now, in this time of financial turmoil and economic uncertainty. It is rather **hard** “not to be anxious about earthly things” right now – a cynic might say that anyone who isn’t anxious isn’t paying attention – but things that are hard to do often are more necessary to do for our spiritual, emotional and physical health.

The cold, hard fact is that in recent years, with our credit binge, America has been on “economic steroids.” Our society as a whole bought short-term gain at the cost of long-term pain just as athletes who injected steroids did. This is the year the long-term pain started showing up. Another analogy is that now is the “morning after” from a long night of “financial binge-drinking” as a nation, and the hang-over is tremendous.

Mortgage debt has doubled since 2000, quadrupled since 1990, and is more than 10 times what it was in 1980. In 1950, in the aggregate, American homeowners had 80% equity in their homes. In the first quarter of 2008, over-all, American homeowners had 46.2% equity in their homes. As recently as 2003, only 7% of homeowners owed more on their mortgages than their homes were worth; in 2007, the figure was 45%.

This is financial binge-drinking.

There are reasons for this behavior. Psychologically, I would say it was the virtually limitless human capacity for self-delusion. Spiritually, it’s also pretty simple: sin. Two sins come especially to mind: greed and idolatry. The really painful part is that, as in many other situations, the victims of the self-delusional, the greedy and the idolatrous include many people who did not behave in any of those ways, but that’s the way sin works: it victimizes the innocent at least as much as the guilty.

Preachers sometimes need to get specific when we talk about sin, otherwise everybody nods in agreement but nothing changes. Specifics may make some of us uncomfortable, but I promise that the bulk of this sermon will concentrate on comfort, guidance and hope.

Greed and self-delusion – this is hardly the first time in the history of the world those two have been joined at the hip. Here’s some of how I see our current national predicament. Multiple Presidents and Congresses of both parties looked at our economy as though it were a baseball game in which, if there were fewer umpires looking at “the financial bases,” all the runners were going to be “safe.” Uh, no. We also had regulators with no common sense or

willingness to regulate. (My favorite example of this – not – is the State of Florida, which thought it was O.K. to allow convicted felons to be licensed as mortgage brokers – including people convicted of forgery, fraud and embezzlement. Gosh, why not?)

Then we had very large well-established financial institutions run by financially sophisticated, very well-paid people who for a while made extra money selling financial “surprise packages” in a very expensive game of musical chairs. When the music stopped Bear Stearns and the Lehman Brothers had no chairs. Lower down the food chain, there were predatory lenders who sold mortgages to people who didn’t understand them and couldn’t afford them – and yes, there were people who took out mortgages they didn’t understand or couldn’t afford and knew it. There were also some people who constantly refinanced their mortgages and cashed out their equity to spend money on “extras,” and people who constantly traded up to get bigger and more impressive-looking houses.

I hope the connection of these behaviors to greed and self-delusion, though painful, is clear. But there is an even deeper spiritual malaise behind it. The basic creed of materialism is that someone’s **ultimate value** can be expressed in dollars or in tangible assets like the size of their house or the cost of their car. That is the kind of idolatry that materialism peddles: worshipping money. Jesus is very blunt about this sin. He tells us “You cannot serve both God and money.”

So, I have hard news. *We as a society* need to acknowledge and repent of our self-delusion, greed and idolatry, including the damage inflicted by it on those individuals, companies and organizations which participated in these behaviors very little or not at all.

More important, I have Good News. No matter what shape any of us are in or will be financially, **our net worth have nothing, nothing to do with our ultimate value.**

Please repeat after me: “I am priceless to God.” (“I am priceless to God.”) Please turn to the person next to you in the pew and repeat after me: “You are priceless to God.” (“You are priceless to God.”) “No matter what.” (“No matter what.”)

Now, everybody take a deep breath, now let it out. There. Now, remember those words when you think about our economy, or your personal economy. And please remember them if your friend or relative or neighbor gets laid off or is in distress. They also are priceless to God – and to us, and we can make tangible that spiritual truth by reminding them of it. More about that later.

First, let’s turn off the news broadcasts and scare headlines in our minds and open up the Bible, specifically this morning’s assigned Scriptures. One of them, our Gospel reading, seems rather strange, especially right now: “The Kingdom of heaven is like...” a king who hires people and pays those who worked one hour as much as those who worked all day? What’s up with this?

Jesus was using the ancient teaching technique of an analogy from a situation his listeners knew to one unknown to them, with a twist to get their attention.

Land-owners often would hire day laborers during harvest season – and the practice continues today, in New Jersey as elsewhere. The King in this parable offers “the usual daily wage” to those hired at dawn, something they find unremarkable – until the King pays *everybody* “the usual daily wage,” even those who work for only an hour, at which point those who worked all day feel treated unfairly.

But this story is not designed to provoke union members to file a grievance nor the Chamber of Commerce to go after this landowner for blowing away the prevailing wage scale for agricultural laborers.

The “pay” which the King gives to the “laborers” in this story is not a coin but *salvation*. This is a story about the End Times: those who the King of Kings calls to do his work in his “field” – the entire world – all get the same “pay”: salvation. Those who work longer don’t get “more saved” than others, because God chooses to be generous to those who “get their acts together” only a short time before Judgment Day. People are either saved or they aren’t; **there are no rich and poor in heaven, or in the Kingdom of God.** Just being there is all the riches anyone could want.

The ultimate reward of living forever in bliss in the nearer presence of God is also not dished out based on peoples’ social status in this life. Perhaps on the contrary, because some rich people stop seeking Heaven because they think their lives seem “heavenly” already. Jesus says the final words of today’s Gospel more than once in more than one context: “The last will be first and the first will be last.” Think about it.

This is comfort and hope indeed for those are “anxious about earthly things.” And, to help us to put things in perspective, *2008 is not 1933*, when 10% of the homes in the country were in foreclosure (vs. 1.4% in 2007), and America is *not* Haiti or Ethiopia or Bangladesh or lots of other places, where the poverty and suffering are quite beyond our experience here.

Plenty of struggling people are just as good and faithful as anyone else. For any of them, right here or anywhere on the globe, God’s generosity is really good news. Jesus emphasized this repeatedly, often to the astonishment of his own disciples. When Jesus said, “It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of Heaven,” Peter blurted out, “then who *can* be saved?” on the theory that if the rich had no chance the poor had less than no chance. Jesus said that salvation depends on God’s grace, *not* on our money.

That’s good news. So, let’s review: contrary to the doctrines of materialism, *there is no connection between a person’s wealth and their prospects for salvation.*

But God’s help doesn’t just kick in when the Kingdom of God comes at The End of Time, or in Heaven in the meantime; God can help the suffering here and now. Let’s look at our first Bible reading, from Exodus. God has only recently led the Israelites out of abject slavery in Egypt where their very survival was threatened by a genocidal Pharaoh. So naturally, the Israelites, on their way through the rugged Sinai Peninsula en route to the Promised Land, say to God, “What have you done for us *lately*?” Now *this* was a “nation of whiners.”

*Of course* God was going to provide for them with food, just as God provided water for them, just as God protected them from all enemies in the wilderness except themselves. (Sin, you know, does take a toll.) The manna in the wilderness was a natural phenomenon – there is a nutritious sticky sweet wafer-like substance that forms at dawn under some bushes indigenous to the Sinai peninsula – but God, after all, *invented* natural phenomena (being the Creator, remember) and simply guided the Israelites to what was safe and good to eat. (Wild mushrooms were not and are not on the list, please note.)

Likewise, Sinai is under the migratory fly way for quails, a nutritious and tasty game bird which, when exhausted at dusk, are easy to catch. Just in time for dinner. Another natural phenomenon provided by God.

It was the natural phenomena provided and pointed out by God which kept the Israelites alive for *40 years* in the wilderness of Sinai until they came to the Promised Land – which looked like California after spending 40 years in northern Nevada. God provides.

We here in this church are provided with a reminder of God's providential care every week: these communion wafers are designed, among other things, to remind us of the manna which kept the Israelites alive in the wilderness. So every time we take communion, remember God's commitment to us in tangible ways through thick and thin.

And whenever we rise from the altar rail, let us remember that *we ourselves* are part of God's commitment to each other and to others beyond this community of faith. We try to live as a community by what we preach, so there are no membership dues here. We survive and thrive as a church on pledges, amounts which are set by the giver and can be changed at any time by the pledger in case of unexpected financial distress.

So, anyone who's been laid off: you can change your pledge. Just send a note to the church. No problem. But please: *keep coming back*. Don't feel embarrassed. Stuff happens. *We're all in this together*. You're just as valuable to God and to us as you were before. Keep coming back. Things will change. You will get through your personal wilderness. And you're not alone: *faith is a team sport*.

For the rest of us, this is an opportunity to show what we're made of. Anyone who can "step up" to help make up for those who are in financial distress is most welcome to do so. And our **mission priorities** as a parish are more important than ever: the struggles against addiction, against domestic violence, against hunger and homelessness, against racism. All these problems become inflamed in hard times.

They know us at the women's shelters. Another car load of strollers arrives from us for survivors of domestic violence with babes in arms and nothing but the clothes on their backs. You should see them when I drive up with *your* gifts: "St. Barnabas is here!"

When our volunteers drive up to the Food Banks with your gifts: "St. Barnabas is here!"

When our volunteers come to the soup kitchen: "St. Barnabas is here!"

And five nights a week, people recovering from addiction – or who want to – know where they can come: "Come to the A.A. meeting at St. Barnabas."

They know us at the Men's Shelter every winter for two weeks as well: "St. Barnabas is here!"

They know us in Kenya, too: in the Upako orphanage, in the churches in Kibera, in the villages around Kakamega as well. And soon, they will know us in Liberia, where we are joining with other Episcopal Churches of our area to help rebuild a school destroyed during that country's civil war. St. Barnabas will be there.

**You are St. Barnabas.** We, together, are St. Barnabas. Together we can, in the words of St. Paul in today's Epistle, "live our lives in a manner worthy of the Gospel of Christ." Each of us is a priceless child of God, and we can treat others as such as well, anytime, anywhere.

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