

Isaiah 49:8-16a
Psalm 131
1 Cor. 4:1-5
Matthew 6:24-34

The New Normal

The last time I preached on these scriptures was in 2008. I looked out that Sunday morning on a sea of faces that were pale, stricken, worry-filled and anxiety-laden. Faces that told of the shock, disbelief, confusion and fear of the unknown. It was the beginning of what we now know to be a deep recession and three years on we are still in it; living into what we now know as the “new normal.”

Jesus said, "No one can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth."

Surely if there was ever a time to understand that money and wealth are not the security and freedom that we thought they were it is now. Seems to me we have just been through a period in our history in the past three years when this message should be loud and clear. Seems to me we saw first-hand what it meant to allow wealth to become our master. Seems to me we got ourselves into a place where our priorities and values got seriously out of line, and we have paid the price for it. Few of us have been unscathed. Our savings, our college funds, our retirement funds all a pale shadow of their former strength and even if they were not, psychologically we all feel impoverished and for many the nightmare continues.

So how did we become slaves to the master “wealth?” Our generation came through a period of austerity. Some of you here are children of the last Great Depression, some lived through the war years, and even I had a ration book in post war Britain. And out of that came the hopes and dreams of our parents that this generation, ours, would have better lives, better education, better opportunities than ever before. And we did, for quite a while. Ours is a generation of entitlement, of hopes and expectations. Our marks of success are measured in income, location, homes, cars, and vacations. All of which adds up to feeling successful, believing ourselves to be secure and free from worry. After all, we work hard, we save, we have a retirement account, health plan, and mortgage. We provide for our families through college funds, life insurance, and financial security. Or so we thought.

Until about three years ago. Even if we didn't physically lose out on our 401K or children's college funds, we felt we did. Our night-time fears became those of how to continue to feed the cow of our worldly goods; the mortgage, the insurance, the credit card. Our worldly anxieties, how to manage if we lost our jobs? How to deal with a home that it worth less than we paid for it? Will we ever be able to retire? The God of wealth is not an easy master to serve. It is heartless and fickle, befitting of the inhuman, unforgiving idol it is.

But there has never been a better time to address this Gospel either because now we know what a house of cards this is. Where is the security? Where is the freedom and happiness? Not there, is it? But it is also timely for another reason, because this Gospel seen in light of experience forces us to face up to the realities of our choices.

When we are so busy trying to fix it, make it all safe and secure, attempting to control the future, we lose sight of the living, loving God that provides us with so much that we just take for granted. When we think we have everything under control, when we think we have legislated and insured ourselves against every possible pitfall and peril, God is an afterthought. It takes the hard lessons of reality to realize what an illusion it all is. When the chips are down, we wake up to the realization that in the early hours of the morning those worries will not change one thing, will not contribute one cent, will not turn back the clock.

But somewhere there, in the dark hours, for people of faith, is the light that holds on to us, even when we don't see it. There is a resilience that knows that light will follow dark, that the sun will rise, and the birds of the air and the flowers of the field will fly and bloom. That there is a force of life and beauty that is free and hopeful, creative and loving, and that force of love is rooting for each one of us – despite the poor choices we made.

This Gospel is timely because for a short while, it seemed as if we would be able to see the idolatry of our culture and where we had taken the wrong way. For a short while, people pulled together, helped neighbors, shared resources. For a short while it seemed as if we might find a new normal. A new normal where relationships matter, staying together matters, muddling through together matters, letting go of excess matters, and above all we begin to really understand that life is more than food and the body more than clothing.

Our right relationship with God and wealth does not deny the importance of needing enough money to live although our recent history has taught us that we probably need less than we think. Rather it is about our relationship with God and with wealth. Wealth, per se, is not the root of the evil, especially when we seek to find the kingdom of God with it. Wealth shared, in thanksgiving for our blessing, places it in right relationship to God. When we seek to share what we have with those who do not, when we give of our first fruits generously to support others, when we take the great commandment on fully, thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart and Mind and Soul, and thou shalt love your neighbor as yourself, then we find a life that is fulfilled and satisfied, not just with stuff – but with the fullness of generosity which is love and joy and that is true wealth.

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