

Sermon: The Rev. George Anastos  
Sunday, February 27, 2011

(This is a transcript of a sermon preached without notes.)

## **The Paradox of Trust, the Trust of Paradox**

Matthew 6:24-34

John Calvin was one of the great exegetes of the church, and yet there are times when he had such odd notions. He says this about the lesson:

Throughout the whole of this discourse, Christ reproves that excessive anxiety, with which men torment themselves, about food and clothing, and, at the same time, applies a remedy for curing this disease. When he forbids them to be anxious, this is not to be taken literally, as if he intended to take away from his people all care. We know that men are born on the condition of having some care; and, indeed, this is not the least portion of the miseries, which the Lord has laid upon us as a punishment...

What? Punishment? Actually Calvin goes on to say some profound things, but worries as punishment?

Of course, we do have plenty of worries in our lives and while some may be different than the worries in Calvin's day, some are pretty universal.

What do you worry about? How about kids? Everyone in the Sanctuary here who is a parent knows what it is like to worry about your kids: will they be healthy? Will they be happy? Will they do okay in school? Will they have friends? Will they survive all the mistakes and accidents to grow up? And once they're grown up, we worry about their relationships. Life is not safe or sure. Neighbors of one of our church families had a 7-year-old son who died in his sleep: perfectly healthy one day, gone the next.

How do we live with all this worry we have sometimes? We worry about our partners in life. Do they still love us? Do they still find us attractive? We worry about work, about conflict with colleagues, about the pressure of getting our job done. We worry about whether we will keep our job, even a job we can't stand. I read a statistic that claimed that over two-thirds of all managers in the United States of America wake up at some point during the night worrying about their jobs. Two-thirds! Millions of people, waking up worrying about jobs.

We bring so much stuff into our worries, into our lives, and it starts to dominate who we are sometimes.

And it is not just relationships that worry us. There's that big worry of money. Are we going to have enough? We've got the house repair, we've got the car repair, we've got all the bills that are coming in. Will there be enough? It starts to eat at us, to consume our spirits, sometimes. Then, you make the mistake sometimes of seeing your financial advisor. We just saw ours recently. It was a frightening experience: "You do not want to run out of money before you die." He laughed and said, "The goal is to have one dollar in the bank when you die." Boy, have you timed it well at that point! How do I do that? And then I figured, well (my daughter is here), "Philippa, if I've got only one dollar in the bank when I

die. Tough, you don't get much. But then again, if I've got one dollar in the bank and I'm still kickin' pretty strong, Hey, I raised you – you OWE me.”

We never seem to run out of things to worry about – relationships, work, finances, dying. It just keeps building up. Sometimes I'm tempted to paraphrase Elizabeth Barrett Browning: “How do I worry? Oh! Let me count the ways...”

But let's go back to the beginning of the passage, to where Jesus introduces his teaching with these words, “You cannot serve two masters. You cannot serve both God and wealth.” I'm always fascinated with how translators decide to translate the Greek into the English. The word for master (“you cannot have two masters”) is *kyrios*. When we hear blind Bartimaeus reaching out to Jesus on the side of the road, saying, “Lord, have mercy,” Bartimaeus is using the word *Kyrios*, saying *Kyrie eleison*. And that is one of the great phrases of the church. The choir has anthem after anthem in their library titled, *Kyrie Eleison*. Lord, have mercy. In this passage that same word is translated as “master.” So when we make money our master, money our Lord, do we cry to it, Kyrie Eleison? Is that the point Jesus is making? When money is our Master, we look to it to save us from our ills, to save us from ourselves. This teaching challenges our priorities, invites us to look long and hard at which Master we hate and which we love, which Master we despise and which we are devoted to.

Of course, this story is not the only one trying to reach us. The world is full of stories eager to influence our behavior. Let's look at advertising. Advertisers are exceptionally skilled in enticing us to buy products. In fact, there is a whole school of thought dedicated to this; it's called consumer capitalism. Consumer Capitalism is a social/political theory based on the belief that consumer demand can be (in fact, *should* be), controlled – or manipulated, depending on your point of view -- in a deliberate and coordinated way on a very large scale to benefit sellers. Victor Lebow, a 20<sup>th</sup> century economist, is perhaps the biggest name in this, largely due to an article he wrote back in 1955. The American economy was really going strong and buying was huge in this post-war boom. In a paper called “Price Competition in 1955,” which appeared in the *Journal of Retailing*, Lebow says:

Our enormously productive economy demands that we make consumption our way of life, that we convert the buying and use of goods into rituals, that we seek our spiritual satisfactions, our ego satisfactions, in consumption. The measure of social status, of social acceptance, of prestige, is now to be found in our consumptive patterns. The very meaning and significance of our lives today expressed in consumptive terms. The greater the pressures upon the individual to conform to safe and accepted social standards, the more does he tend to express his aspirations and his individuality in terms of what he wears, drives, eats – his home, his car, his pattern of food serving, his hobbies.

These commodities and services must be offered to the consumer with a special urgency...We need things consumed, burned up, worn out, replaced, and discarded at an ever-increasing pace. We need to have people eat, drink, dress, ride, live, with ever more complicated and, therefore, constantly more expensive consumption.

We actually coined a phrase for this back in the sixties and seventies. We called it Conspicuous Consumption or “keeping up with the Joneses.” Advertising is very effective at weaving the “need” for products into the stories of our lives. Ads urge us to want more; they reframe want in the language of need: we *need* something more, to be accepted, to have prestige, to have meaning and significance in our lives . . . and the solution to that need is consumption.

No wonder we are anxious! The whole model of consumer capitalism is built on the foundation of a world view that leads to Money becoming Lord in the first place, and that larger world view is that we live in scarcity. You see, the issue isn't money per se. There's nothing good or evil about money. The danger, as Luther once observed, is when we trust any material thing for our every good. Once we believe that only money (or its children, material possessions) can satisfy our every need, then we suddenly discover that we don't have enough. Money, after all, is finite. So once we decide money grants security, we are ushered immediately into a world of counting, tracking, and stock piling. No wonder we worry. In a world of scarcity, there will never be enough to go around.

This is the belief – as prevalent in the first century as it is now – that Jesus is confronting. Jesus lives in (and calls his disciples to live in) a different economy altogether: not the economy of scarcity, but rather an economy of abundance. Jesus is saying, There is enough and more than enough. And we know this if we think about it. When a child is born, do we have less love for our partner? When a second child is born, do we have less love for our first child because there's only so much love and now it needs to be divided? No, what we find is that the more we love, the more love we have to give. It is a radically different economy that God invites us to partake in.

So the question becomes how we even begin to bring all this together, to find some balance between the sense of God's abundant economy of grace and the world where we've been taught to worry so deeply about what we might not have.

If we think about these stories and teachings and wisdom that we have from scripture, the words of the prophets, of Jesus, that offer us a different vision, we begin to see with different eyes, hear with different ears, understand with a different heart. So what are the stories? What are the stories that God invites us to? Think of the story of the Good Samaritan, the story of fear on the one hand and abundant love on the other. The story of the prodigal son, scarcity on the one hand but God's abundant love, abundant human love on the other hand.

A different vision of life allows our stories to be in conversation. The false story of scarcity, the story of keeping up with the Joneses, the story of our own experiences of grace and abundance, the master stories of scripture, they begin to intersect. And we begin to see that we can choose the story we want to define our lives. We can choose to live into a different economy than the one that has us worried. To support us in that, we have the four pillars of the church. We have worship – we come to put ourselves into the presence of God who is always pouring out gift. We have Christian formation, where we are shaped into the image of God who is abundant love and generosity. We have Christian service, where we reach out with the hands of God to share that abundance. And we have Christian community, where we learn together to be a radical people of God's promise of abundance. All of these allow us to be a reflection of God's love to the world.

We can hold up the strength of who we are trying to be as church and set it alongside all the ads that try to manipulate us, all the messages that tell us to worry. The world will continue to try to press us up against those ads, to force us to give in to the manipulation. But, together, we can see encourage each other to conform, instead, to God's story.

We have the story of theology which is always working to bring together the story of God with the story of creation, the story of humanity. We have the opportunity to look to the face of God, the promises of

God, to offer us meaning and purpose. Scripture affirms that we are already inspired by and wrapped in the Spirit of God.

So I ask you this week to do two things. First, in your prayer time, give simple thanks for all those places of abundance in your life. Think about them, name them, write them down, pray about them, invite them to shape you and comfort you. The second thing I ask you to do is to share that. Sit down at your dinner tables and talk about your stories of abundance. And when you are with colleagues at work, share your stories of abundance. Invite them to share their stories of abundance, of gift, of grace, of thanks. Call your family, call your friends, speak to them in a spirit of abundance. God invites us into an economy of peace, not worry; of gratitude, not grasping; of abundance, not scarcity. God invites us into God's economy.

Let's have a couple of moments of silence.

May the words of all of our mouths, and the meditations of all of our hearts, be always acceptable in your sight, O God, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.