

Haslett Community Church-United Church of Christ  
Trinity Sunday- June 3, 2007

Scripture lessons: Psalm 146:1-7 & Matthew 6:19-24

GOD AND OUR STUFF

Jesus wants us to see clearly. Throughout his Sermon on the Mount, he works to help us understand how things really are. If our take on life's basic realities is skewed and out of focus, we end up lost in the dark.

As he says in today's second Scripture, "The eye is the lamp of the body. So, if your eye is healthy, your whole body will be full of light; but if your eye is unhealthy, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light in you is darkness, how great is the darkness!" If what we take to be spiritual light is, in fact, darkness, our darkness goes doubly deep. If the things we take to be fundamentally true are, in fact, false, the more lost we become.

The truth about our "stuff"- about money and what money can buy- is truth we're particularly prone to lose track of. This morning I urge us to reflect on three distinct messages we hear over and over again about this part of our lives. They're all false, but we get so much encouragement to believe they're true. We need, therefore, to keep bringing them into the full light of Jesus' teaching. We need to persist in dispelling their darkness through the truth that Jesus gives.

Message #1: If only I can get more stuff, then I'll be content. When we Americans are polled about the one thing we believe would most help to improve our quality of life, the #1 answer we give again and again is "more money"- more money with which we can buy more stuff.

Over and over again we hear that we *should* be discontented with what we already have. We hear that the cure for our discontent is only a few purchases away. "Buy me! Try me! Use me! Drive me! Wear me! Put me on!"

I went to Rite-Aid the other day for eye drops. One of the aisles I mindlessly walked down on my way to the eye care section suddenly hit me with how much stuff there is to put on our hair. There's stuff to wash it, condition it, mousse it, dye it, curl it, straighten it, get rid of it, or grow it. No matter the exact nature of our discontent with our hair, there's stuff we can buy that promises to make it better.

If only we can buy a little more, if only we can get our hands on all the right stuff, then we'll finally be content. Not only the small stuff like for our hair, but big stuff, too- houses, cars, boats, vacation trips, restaurants, entertainments, clothes, jewelry, electronics, sports equipment, the best schools, the highest-paying jobs, cutting-edge drugs, the newest medical technology, hefty, well-diversified stock portfolios, a bulging retirement account. Through the advertising that's become so much a part of our daily life we constantly hear how great more stuff will be. We hear this, even as we forget that we already have more than 99% of all the people who've ever lived ever had.

Our children hear it like children have never heard it before. Between 1980 and 2004 the amount spent on children's advertising in the United States rose from \$100 million a year to \$15 billion a year, an increase of 15,000 percent. In her book, *Consuming Kids*, author Susan Linn writes that "comparing the advertising of two or three decades ago to the commercialism that permeates our children's world (now) is like comparing a BB gun to a smart bomb."

Social scientists John de Graaf, David Waan, and Thomas Naylor also point out that 21<sup>st</sup> century American children are in a situation unprecedented in human history. Of all the information they receive, for most of them the number one source is *not* their parents, families, schools, or religious communities. Their number one source is advertising. More information comes to them from people trying to sell them stuff than from anyone else. The overall message is clear: "If only you can get more stuff, then you'll be happy."

Jesus tells us the truth that runs completely counter to this message. He says, “Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal.” He makes the obvious but frequently ignored point that stuff and more stuff never last. Money and what money can buy, no matter how much we pile up, can never bring us true contentment.

If we don't believe Jesus on this, then maybe the words of some of America's most famous rich folk will strike home. John D. Rockefeller said, “I have made many millions, but they have brought me no happiness.” John Jacob Astor made money hand over fist, but at the end of his life lamented, “I am the most miserable man on earth.” Amidst the piles of his wealth, Henry Ford longed for happier days when he worked as a mechanic. Andrew Carnegie observed of himself and his fellow tycoons, “Millionaires seldom smile”.

St. Paul saw the same thing in his time and place. In I Timothy, chapter 6, he speaks of those who “in their eagerness to be rich . . . have . . . pierced themselves with many pains” (verse 10). By contrast, he says, “. . . there is great gain in godliness combined with contentment, for we brought nothing into the world, so that we can take nothing out of it; but if we have food and clothing we will be content with these” (verses 6-8).

Paul echoes the teaching of Jesus. Jesus says we should pray simply for our daily bread. He calls us to lay up treasure not on earth, but in heaven. Jesus and Paul hear message #1, “If only I can get more stuff, then I'll be content,” and know that it's *false*.

Message #2: “I can always buy more stuff now and pay for it later.” In I Timothy 6 Paul also says, “(T)hose who want to be rich fall into temptation and are trapped by many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction” (verse 9). The many ways that message #2 is broadcast today demonstrate that 2000 years later there are still many temptations and traps into senseless and harmful desires that can plunge us into ruin and destruction.

For example, 40 billion mail order catalogues are sent into American homes every year. You probably figure that most of those end up in your mailbox. The message of the catalogs is clear: buy more stuff.

They're joined in the box by letters from those who'll gladly arrange for us to pay later for the more stuff we want now. How many credit card solicitations are sent out annually in the United States.? Only a little over 8 billion which is an average of a mere 65 or so per household per year. Our daughter, Sophie, has been getting them since at least 4<sup>th</sup> grade.

The pitch from the credit card companies can be so flattering. There's no denying that. On the envelope they'll catch your eye with, “You're smart. You're confident. You're successful.” Inside, they'll praise your credit history to the hilt and tell you how happy they are to offer you thousands upon thousands of dollars in more credit.

They'll stress how confident they are that you'll make all your payments on time, that your checks will never bounce, and that you'll always stay below your credit limit. They're so confident you'll do all those things that they put what will happen if you don't only in very small print on a separate page. Tiny print on a different page, I suppose, because they're so sure none of those things will ever apply to you- things like an interest rate increase from 11% to 19%, although these days that would be a very small increase as far as penalty rates go.

Of course, no such thing would ever happen to any of us (wink, wink). Yet for the sake of illustration, let's say that it did. Let's say I have the credit card debt of the average American household as of this past Friday which according to cardtrak.com is \$9659. Let's say that I fall behind in my payments so that my interest rate gets bumped from 11% to 19%. My money's tight to the point where I can only make the minimum monthly payment of 2%. How long will it take me to pay off my debt?

It'll take 67½ years. I'll be 121 years old when I finally pay off my \$9659. By then, I'll have paid an additional \$35,303 in interest. We all know that this is *not* a far-fetched example. Since 1996, we Americans have ended up in credit debt holes deep and frequent enough that we've run a national average of well over 1 million personal bankruptcies every year.

What was it Paul said about temptations and traps that lure us into senseless and harmful desires that can plunge us into ruin and destruction? They're still out there- maybe more than ever.

Thousands of young people in Haslett and our surrounding communities will graduate from high school today. Let me request right now that we pray for the very best for them as they move into their futures. Given our current cultural setting, this means praying specifically for them to have the spiritual wisdom and support they'll always need to resist the lure of message #2. Let's pray that as the neon assault of "I can always buy more stuff now and pay for it later" flashes at them day after day, they'll see it steadily with Jesus and Paul for the nasty and deceptive snare that it surely is.

Message #3: "My stuff belongs to me." This is probably where Jesus' teaching differs most from the assumptions about stuff most popular in our society. We're encouraged to think more and more stuff will make us feel more secure, more powerful, and more important. The belief in its ability to do that is rooted in the conviction that "My stuff belongs to me." It's part of me, me, me and it's mine, mine, mine.

Jesus says a firm no to all of that. He's sure that our stuff doesn't belong to us. It belongs to God, and we're to use it on God's behalf. The fourth petition of the model prayer he taught us earlier in the Sermon on the Mount packs his teaching on this into seven simple words, "Give us this day our daily bread."

Jesus tells us to pray *this* day, i.e., *every* day, for the gift of bread. This reminds us daily that our stuff is a *gift* from God- a gift made possible only through God's generous acts of creation.

He tells us to pray simply for *bread*. Bread is basic, so that praying with Jesus for bread means praying only for the basic necessities of life- food, clothing, and shelter. We pray with him, too, for *daily* bread, for bread that's enough just for *today*, no more and no less.

This is jarring to any of us who live in a culture that otherwise urges us to want, expect, and even demand more and more stuff. But does Jesus mean with his prayer that it's always wrong, in and of itself, to have more than our daily basics? We can't get around the fact that he speaks repeatedly of the spiritual dangers of wealth. In today's Scripture, he says, "Don't store it up." Later, he tells a rich young man to sell all his stuff for the sake of his soul. He exclaims to the crowd, "How hard it is for those who are rich to enter God's kingdom." At the same time, he has people who are unmistakably rich among his original followers.

Again Paul can help us clarify this core of Jesus' teaching. In Philippians, chapter 4 Paul says, "I have learned to be content with whatever I have. I know what it is to have little and . . . I know what it is to have plenty . . . I have learned the secret of being well-fed and of going hungry, of having plenty and of being in need" (verses 11-12). What is that secret? "I can do all things through him who strengthens me" (verse 13).

Paul learned to be strong and content in every circumstance by staying focused on God. He took to heart the first three petitions of Jesus' prayer which devoted him, above all, to God, to God's holiness, will, and kingdom. "Our Father in heaven, hallowed be Your name, Your kingdom come, Your will be done . . ."

In times of little, Paul knew God's holy will could still be done and would bring him the deepest satisfactions. In times of plenty, he knew that the extra stuff he had could be used, too, in service to God's reign. That's the key. When we have more than we need we need to recognize that it's not there to hoard or use selfishly. It's there for service to God's reign.

Preacher John Killinger tells of a man in a church he once led who made millions of dollars building housing developments and shopping centers. This man had *far* more stuff than he'd ever need. But he knew in his bones that it was all a gift from God. Out of his abundant stuff, he gave continuously to provide food for the hungry, clinics for the sick, and homes for the homeless.

He knew that Jesus had taught, "Give *us* this day *our* daily bread", not "Give *me* this day *my* daily bread." He understood this meant that God's holy will for God's kingdom come is for everyone to have the food, clothing, and shelter they need. He realized that when anyone goes hungry, ill-clothed, or homeless in a world where there's enough for all, God is offended. He

understood that when those who have more stuff than they need act as if it's there only for them, God is outraged. He knew what Gregory of Nyssa, one of the early church's great teachers, meant when he wrote, "The bread that's spoiling in our houses belongs to the hungry. The shoes that mildew under our beds belong to those who have none. The money that depreciates in our treasuries belongs to the poor."

More stuff can never make us content. We can't always buy more stuff now and pay for it later. Our stuff doesn't belong to us.

It belongs to God. Our life with it brings contentment only when we use it in service to God's reign. To think otherwise is to get caught in a nasty, deceptive, and even deadly snare.

That's the truth and no matter how out-of-fashion it might often be it's what Jesus teaches us. He calls us, first and foremost, to embrace God's reign which has come near. He says we can serve God's kingdom with or without much stuff. But he's absolutely clear that we cannot serve God *and* wealth. If we have ears to hear, let's listen to him. Amen.