

Sermon for Pentecost 20 (Proper 21A)

September 21, 2008

Christ Church, Andover

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Matthew 20:1-16

What a week it has been! Although you wouldn't know it by looking out at all of your beautiful faces here this morning, the world sat on the brink of disaster this week, with the near collapse of our financial markets in the U.S. We're told that these events could have catastrophic effects on all our lives, and if you were watching your 401K plummet this week, it may already feel that way to you. With the collapse of some of the biggest financial institutions in the country, and the federal takeover of others, we have witnessed the worst week in the financial markets since the Great Depression – the kind of thing that happens only once a century, perhaps. Historic. If there is a silver lining to this very ominous cloud, it is that the President and Congress apparently have risen above their partisanship to take some drastic measures that the experts tell us just might save us from total disaster – even if these same measures do put our children and grandchildren further in debt until long after all of us here are gone.

All of a sudden this week I hear more people talking about the fantasy world we've been living in – spending beyond our means, mortgaging ourselves on the hopes of future gains, living lifestyles and buying things that we're told we are entitled to by virtue of how hard we work and how productive we are. Commentators are pointing out that not only do we as a society apparently not save at all – we actually have a negative savings rate, which means that we spend more than we make.

If there were to be another silver lining to this cloud, it might be that we really would wake up, start spending less, live within our means, which

means living more modest lifestyles that don't take for granted either that the money will somehow come, or that we really do deserve all this stuff.

My fear, however, is that once this story is no longer at the top of the news cycle, we'll quickly forget, and it will be back to the shopping mall – much in the same way that it happened in the past few months with gas prices. Once they hit \$4 a gallon, everyone kind of woke up! Started driving less and thinking more about fuel efficiency -- even about energy independence. Everybody was now on board to save the planet from the effects of fossil fuels. Orders for hybrid cars skyrocketed, and SUVs sat on dealer lots. However, once prices went DOWN to ONLY \$3.57 a gallon, sales of SUVs went back up. Go figure.

We are apparently a people of short lived convictions, and infinite capacity for rationalizing our indulgences!

Well, it's been a heck of a week for the economists! I understand about 10% of what they're saying. But hearing economists finally tell us that we're spending too much because we feel entitled to our stuff begins to sound less like Adam Smith, and a little more like Jesus.

The Gospel we just heard offers us some insight into the upside down (not trickle down) economics of Jesus. (There have been notable people willing to recognize Jesus as their favorite philosopher, but not many that acknowledge him as their favorite economist!) Yes, his are upside down economics. Did you hear that little story he told? It's a story about a landowner who hires day laborers. He hires some in the morning, after agreeing to their wage for the day. At noon, and at 3 o'clock, he did the same – went out and found some more laborers, and made an agreement with them for what they would make. Then at 5 o'clock, he did the same – near the end of the day, he found some workers still looking for work, and told them to come, too.

When evening came, he called those he had hired last to pay them. And when he gave them what he had agreed with the ones he had hired first thing in the morning, the ones who had been there all day got kind of excited! They thought, wow! They've just worked one hour, and look what they got! We'll surely get lots more!

But when it came their turn to be paid, and they got exactly what they had agreed they would get, they were angry and they complained. "How can you give them the same as you give us, when we worked all day?! We deserve more!"

But the landowner comes back. "How can you be upset when I gave you what we agreed?! Are you envious because I am generous with these others? Can't I do what I want with what is mine?"

Notice how the ethic shifts: from the ethic of entitlement, to the ethic of generosity. They argued that they *deserved* more because they *worked* more. Logical. The landowner, however (who represents God in this parable), sees the situation through a different lens. He gives more to those at the end of the day as an act of extravagant and gracious generosity. He had as much compassion on those who stood around waiting to be hired all day, hoping to be able to feed their families, too, as he did on those who had worked all day. The focus is on the generosity of the giver – not on who deserves what, who's up and who's down.

Now it is true that this parable is not *just* about economics. Those early Christians in Matthew's community who heard this story would have immediately related it to the fact that the Gentiles are the Johnny-come-latelys, and yet they are the recipients of the same grace as those who have borne the burden of covenant relationship with God through the ages. But it is a story that reinforces a principle than runs throughout Jesus' teachings –

that idea that the first shall be last and the last first. That the poor are the blessed ones and the meek the inheritors of the earth. And whether it is in offering God's love and grace to Gentiles equally with the people of Israel, or in God's preferential option for the poor, it all speaks to one basic thing: and that is the *generosity* of a loving God. It's just who God is.

Now that raises a very important point. Because it's not enough for us to say, "isn't that great! God is generous!" That misses the whole point. Jesus is establishing an ethic of generosity here, because he so wants us human beings to live fully into our humanity that is made in the image and likeness of God. In other words, to be fully who we were made to be in the image of God, we, too, must be generous! Even extravagantly so!

Extravagant generosity and "entitlement" just don't go together very well, do they! Perhaps our current economic crisis will help us all to think a little bit more about the radically different ways of life that these two attitudes produce.

The children who begin Sunday School today here at Christ Church will have a unique opportunity during this year to move from entitlement to extravagant generosity. I'm not sure if all the teachers will be introducing it today or not, but soon the children will learn that the offerings they bring each week (which we hope very much to encourage) will go to pay the school fees of 15 children, 11 of them orphans, in the Democratic Republic of Congo. These children live in the city of Goma in the eastern region of Congo, an area undergoing civil war, a city still recovering from the eruption of a volcano that covered 40% of the city just six years ago, then erupted again just last year, a part of the world ravaged by HIV/AIDS. It's a part of the world where war, extreme poverty, natural disasters, and preventable diseases have left countless widows and orphans, with no social safety net to support them. Families take in orphans as they are able. I visited some of their homes this past May. Churches in the region

speak of their ministry to “the vulnerables,” by which they mean people living in IDP camps, widows and orphans – vulnerables indeed.

The 15 children whose fees will be paid by our own Sunday school children would not be able to go to school without this kind of assistance. Many children in Goma do not go to school at all. We may not always be able to give every child, every person, all that they deserve. But we can by moving in the direction of God’s extravagant generosity, give hope to some.

Times of economic crisis can be times of real learning and deep spiritual growth. I hope this will be that kind of a time for all of us. It’s a good time (if we haven’t begun already) to get our heads and our hearts into the Word and learn more deeply what this way of Jesus is really all about. Join a small group, jump into a Bible study or take the “Experiencing Jesus” class that’s creating quite a buzz around here. Think about doing something more to open yourself to God through spiritual practices or study or service or all of the above. It’s time to focus on what really lasts, and to move away from what does not.

The Collect for today could not be more appropriate than it is this week. I’ll close by praying this timely prayer that we opened our service with today once again. Let us pray.

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.