

Homily – Mammon or God

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Over the past few years, I have learned that some sermon topics are tough for people to listen to.

I have preached about death.

I have preached about suffering.

I have preached about forgiveness and reconciliation.

I have preached about hell.

I have preached about war.

I have preached about stewardship.

I have preached about anger. Christians don’t get angry do we, or at least we think we are not supposed to.

I have preached about the Trinity, one of the toughest theological topics out there.

This week I am going to speak about one of the things people want to hear the least from a preacher. Can you guess what this unfavored topic is? It is pretty explicit in today’s Gospel reading. The topic of today’s homily is money, or more specifically about how we all make money or Mammon our god.

Wikipedia, defines Mammon as a term that was used in Biblical literature to describe riches, avarice, and worldly gain. It was personified as a false god in the New Testament. The term is often used to refer to excessive materialism or greed as a negative influence.” During the Middle Ages, in the 12th century Peter Lombard says, "Riches are called by the name of a devil, namely Mammon." And, in the 17th century John Milton's Paradise Lost describes Mammon as a fallen angel who values earthly treasure over all other things. And two hundred years ago, Thomas Carlyle wrote, “the 'Gospel of Mammonism' became simply a metaphoric personification for the materialist spirit of the nineteenth century.”

I have to smile when I hear about the *“materialist spirit of the nineteenth century.”* I smile at the phrase for the folks of the 19th century could never have imagined how the spirit of materialism would continue to grown in the 20th and 21st centuries. We have all made a huge god of materialism and wealth. And unfortunately, you and I are not immune to the god, Mammon, at least I know that I am not.

Many like to say that America is a Christian nation, but I would contend that America is a nation of Mammon. It is not just those that fail to go to church that make a god of Mammon. Even though we are here in church today, worshiping the real God, most of us are also worshippers of Mammon.

Can you see why this is the topic people want to hear least in a sermon? It cuts too close to home. How many times can you say that you have heard a really, really good sermon about money, and our love of money? From my own experience, I know that I reject speeches and sermons about money. I reject them and I deny that I have a problem. And, doesn't it feel a little pointless to try to do anything to change. Money is the center of our society and part of me doesn't want our society to change. I want America to stay the way that it is. We are a consumer society. Consuming helps to give people jobs and the associated income. When terrorists attack us, we made sure to keep shopping and consuming. The only time our consuming was dampened was last year during our shelter at home emergency. And, I think this was only temporary.

As Americans we fought against communism, and won. We are proud to have defeated a culture and economic model that denied the superiority of capitalism. We think that self-interest and consuming are what make things work so well together. We are a land, we say, where even the poorest person can become wealthy. That can happen through hard work and brains or it can happen in an instant with the Lotto. Did you hear that someone in the Morro Bay won over \$500 million in the Lotto last week. In an instant the life of that family was changed. And, perhaps not for the better.

In today's Gospel reading Jesus tells the rich, young ruler to give away his money and his stuff. This is a man who was probably used to the privileges that go with wealth. He probably even thought his wealth was a sign of divine favor, and Jesus tells him to give it all away and follow him. And, the rich, young man does something no one else does. When Jesus invites him to follow and become a disciple, the man declines. There are other stories in the Gospels about those who accepted the invitation, but this rich, young man declines to follow Jesus. I think this shows the overwhelming power of Mammon, not just two thousand year ago, but for us today. We worship Mammon.

And, there is something else unusual about today's Gospel reading. Usually, Jesus teaches about non-dualistic thinking. Jesus teaches that most of the questions in life do not have black and white answers. They have gray answers. But, in today's lesson, Jesus is absolutely dualistic. There is no middle ground. One either chooses Mammon or one chooses God. Can you see why the topic I have struggled with the most in my own spiritual journey is that of money? I have struggled for the Bible and more specifically Jesus have so much to say about money, wealth and materialism.

Yes, I want to have a calling in ordained ministry, but I do not want to take a vow of poverty. I have friends, who have taken a vow of poverty. I admire these friends. I really do, but I don't want to give up money. Do you?

I fear making less money for I like money. I like spending a little more to buy a pick-up truck and a Tesla. I like being able to fly up to Seattle to see my daughter. I like living where I live and having some equipment to work the land. I don't want to give up these things. And, I can come up with lots of excuses why I need to stay consuming.

Of course I recognize that all of these tough questions about money are from a place of power and privilege. There are many parts of our world where people don't worry about buying a car, or flying on an airplane. There are many parts of our world where people don't think about spending money because they make do with a lot less.

Or, how can you worry about Mammon when someone in your family is dying from AIDs, malaria, or tuberculosis? How can you worry about Mammon when more than 40% of new mothers die in childbirth? I might worry about money things but so many people in so many parts of our world do not worry about these things because they worry about more important things. We usually forget our power and privilege. And, we deny that Mammon keeps us from our living God. I pray that we can all do the heavy lifting to turn back to God. Do you want to do that?

If you do, then the first step in returning to God is to be mindful and self-aware of our present situation and to acknowledge that we, yes all of us, have made a god of Mammon. That is why we do what is uncomfortable for some. That is why we talk about money in church. Money and spirituality go together, because if we don't talk about money, then Mammon becomes our God instead of our real, and living God.

The second step in returning to God is to remember the source of our many blessings. Like the rich, young ruler in today's Gospel reading, we often think we have earned our riches. We think that God favors us with wealth because God is pleased with us. This is entirely wrong. Yes, our blessings are a gift from God, but they have nothing to do with earning them. God loves all equally and unconditionally. There is nothing we can do to increase God's love for us, and there is nothing we can do to decrease God's love for us. God's love, and mercy, and grace is unconditionally and free. To understand the transformative power of the Gospel we must let go of this notion of earning and embrace the notion of free grace. God's love is unearned and undeserved, but it is given to us anyway. And, we respond to God's free grace by loving God back, loving others, and loving ourselves. Mammon says we must earn everything and balance out the accounts. Our living God says that it is all free and there is no accounting. There is just accepting and responding to grace. This is why we talk about money in church so that you can change your lens from one of scarcity and accounting to one of abundance and openness.

And, the third step in returning to God is to remember that what one does with money and how one treats money impact our spiritual lives. I should point out that it is not money that is evil. As the Apostle Paul wrote in the New Testament it not money, but the love of money that is the root of all evil. There is a major difference. Money becomes evil when rights are not balanced with responsibilities. When these are balanced then money can do a great deal of good for both the giver and the receiver, and hopefully for others as well. When an individual or family balances its rights with its responsibilities then money can be a moral good for all concerned. A corporation acts morally when it balances its rights to a just profit with its responsibilities for the common good upon which it depends and profits. To our detriment, twenty-first century America has become so focused on individualism that we have lost sight of the common good and that serves Mammon. When a person, a community, or a corporation does not consistently seek this balance between rights and responsibility, then we no longer work for the common good. This is when the dominance and enthrallment of money takes over as a demon that is beyond our moral control. Today this demon of Mammon is destroying the common good and even our common home, this earth. So, we talk about money in church so that you can work to balance rights with responsibilities. In this way money is not evil and, we refocus on the common good.

Remember, the real, and living God can help us, if we but acknowledge and ask for help. Be mindful of the shackles Mammon has placed on your life. Shift your lens from one of earned wealth to one of underserved blessing. And find balance in the ways you use money. In this way we make more room in our hearts and in our souls for the real God. Mammon is strong, whether it is during the time of Jesus or even in our own time. Mammon is strong, but our God is stronger. Do you want to turn away from Mammon and back to our real, and living God?