

Homily – God’s Lottery

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Well, did you buy one? The Mega Millions lottery on Friday is estimated to be about \$1.3 billion. This will be the second largest lottery prize ever, so did you buy a ticket? Or, maybe the more accurate question is how many tickets did you buy? You know that if you commit to giving ten percent of your winnings to the church then you are more likely to win. Actually, I don’t think that is the way that it works. Instead, you have to promise God that you will use the winnings for something really good and worthy. Well maybe that’s not true either.

A few years ago, I shared in a sermon that if I won the lottery I would use a good percentage of the winnings to try to end the death penalty here in California. I think the existence of the death penalty is part of the foundation of violence we have in the United States, and I think the eradication of the death penalty would eliminate deadly errors, and be more consistent with the teachings of Jesus. However, some of you may be glad that I haven’t won the lottery and put the money to use against the death penalty. And, we all know that no matter what we promise God about the money, it will not change our chances of winning. Money, money, money...

Jesus had a lot to say about money with his most famous quote being “It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.” This quote is in three of the four gospels about Jesus.

And the Apostle Paul wrote, “The love of money is the root of all evil.” Money was one of the top five topics taught by Jesus and Paul. We think twenty-first century America is driven by money, but two thousand years ago, the same was true.

And in today’s Gospel reading, Jesus looks at the rich landowner reveling in his stores of grain, and sees a person drowning in self-absorption. A man enamored of his own power. A man oblivious to his own mortality. Notice the narcissism of his inner dialogue: “I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul, ‘Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, and be merry.’” In the carefully curated narrative of a proud, self-made man, Jesus sees an isolated, insecure soul who has forgotten human connection, forgotten God’s generosity and provision, forgotten that possession is not stewardship, and forgotten that in the face of Death, the great equalizer, we are all naked paupers but for the grace of God. And, to bring this closer to home, this is not just a story and a lesson for two thousand years ago, but it is an indictment of our culture and of us as individuals. You and I worship money, and the Mega-Millions lottery plays directly into that love of money.

Now, at this point, I am tempted to retreat into abstraction and into metaphor. To say, “Well, this Gospel lesson is not literally about money. It’s about my attitude towards money. I’m tempted to say that it’s about my heart. Money itself is neither here nor there; money itself is morally neutral.

Well, yes the abstractions are true. But also no. Again, the squirmy fact is that Jesus talks about money and possessions more than just about any other topic. Why? Because there’s something about it that distorts us. Something that makes us defensive. Something that makes it very hard for us to hear the Gospel in its risky, scandalous, impolite, imprudent, and radical fullness. Something in the allure of money that grabs hold of us, and doesn't easily let go. And as I say this it is not just something that is theoretical. For, I know in my own lived life, that money has grabbed a hold of me and can’t seem to let it go. I can honestly say that I want to let go of my love of money, but I would be lying if I said I had succeeded. I envy the few of you that have already gone down the path of letting of money, and I wish I could say your preacher can lead you there, but I haven’t achieved it yet. Perhaps this sermon should be called the confession of a greedy preacher. And, I don’t say that just to lighten the mood and let you off the hook, for I don’t want to let myself off the hook. Money is one of the biggest impediments to a healthy spiritual journey.

To paraphrase a frequent theme from the great spiritual teacher Meister Eckhart, the spiritual life has much more to do with subtraction than it does with addition. All great spirituality is about letting go. But we have grown up with the capitalist worldview, and it has blinded our spiritual seeing. We tend to think at almost every level that more is better, even though less is more. There is an alternative worldview. There is a worldview in which all of us can succeed. It isn’t a win/lose capitalist worldview where only a few win and most loose. It is a win/win worldview, if we’re willing to let go and recognize that this, right here, right now, is enough and affirm, that this is all I need. But that can only be true if we move to the level of being away from the levels of doing and acquiring.

The mystical religion taught to us by Jesus is always pointing us toward the joy of naked being. At that level, we experience enough-ness, abundance, and even more than enough-ness. If we’ve never been introduced to that world, we will of course try to satisfy ourselves with possessions, accomplishments, important initials after our names, fancy cars, beautiful homes, none of which are bad in themselves. They are only unable to satisfy, and that’s exactly why we need more and more of them. We need more and more of what doesn’t work. If it worked, we would not need more of it.

Arthur C. Brooks has written a new book called “From Strength to Strength: Finding Success, Happiness, and Deep Purpose in the Second Half of Life. In it Brooks writes that getting smaller can actually lead to greater satisfaction in life. He says, lately

there has been an explosion of books on minimalism, which all recommend downsizing your life to get happier, to chip away the detritus of your life. Some look at downsizing as a curse, and they try to hold on to as much stuff as possible, often with the aid of a storage unit. This is like the rich man in today's Gospel reading who built bigger and bigger barns to hold his stuff. Other look at downsizing as an opportunity and a blessing to let go, and only keep a quarter or a tenth of what one used to have.

But it's not just about having less stuff to weigh you down. We can, in fact, find immense fullness when we pay attention to smaller and smaller things. In his book "The Miracle of Mindfulness", the Buddhist master, Thich Nhat Hanh, says, while washing the dishes one should only be washing the dishes, which means that while washing the dishes one should be completely aware of the fact that one is washing the dishes. Why? If we are thinking about the past or future, we are not alive during the time we are washing the dishes. And, this reveals a truth, a gift from God. At this very instant, nothing is wrong. Everything in the past is already happened, and everything in the future is unknown and unknowable. What you experience in the present moment is always just physical sensation. You see, feel, smell, taste, and hear. When you chase what was, you miss what is. It's entirely impossible to emotionally react when your mind is in the present moment. As such, since emotional reactions are synonymous with suffering, you cannot suffer in the present moment, and each new now. You can suffer only when your mind is in the past or future. Now, keeping your attention perpetually in the present moment, without digression, is virtually impossible. Meditators may spend their entire lives attempting to cultivate this ability. Therefore, you shouldn't expect yourself to do this very well. However, it is helpful to recognize that, in the present moment, nothing is ever wrong. God is with us.

And, here's another way to be in the present. A few years ago my mother and I were floating on rafts on the pond at the family farm. She looked over at me and said I love the sound of the wind through the leaves of an aspen tree. I didn't know what she meant and she had to explain. The sound of the wind through the leaves of an aspen tree has a different sound than the wind going through other leaves. My mother said, there is a tinkling sound, and I like hearing it. Two weeks ago I was again floating on that pond with my mother. And I got to hear the sound of the wind through the leaves of an aspen tree once again. God is present in that sound.

The Mega Millions lottery plays right to our weak spot. It plays to our craving for money and stuff. However, God has a different type of lottery. It is a lottery in which we all win. God shares abundantly with all, and God's mercy and grace are ever flowing. This is a lottery that we should all want to play, God's lottery. May you already see how you have already won. We have everything we already need. We are truly blessed by God.