

Sermon, March 8, 2009
2nd Sunday in Lent
Church

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St. Gabriel's Episcopal

Marion, MA

“For what will it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his life?”

Oh, fine, preacher. This is a fine week to talk about materialism, acquisitiveness, and the true spiritual riches. Go ahead! Pile on. After all, we're getting used to hearing bad news from every other source. Why not some platitudes from the pulpit trying to tell us that we haven't really lost anything meaningful?

Let's agree on the data. There were more layoffs last week. Worst unemployment in a quarter of a century. Citibank stock in the basement. Dow Jones Industrial Average takes another dive. AIG needs more billions. Ponzi scheme billionaires Madoff and Stanford face the music for defrauding investors. The administration wants a spending plan that my great-grandchildren will still be paying for.

In the light of all this, I suspect that for many faithful and—up 'til recently—well-to-do people, the question might be turned around. Some of you might want to ask our Lord,

“For what will it profit you, Lord, if we lose the whole world and save our lives?”

In other words, is there some overarching spiritual blessedness in watching what we've worked so hard to achieve and save evaporate as we enter retirement? Are you orchestrating this meltdown to try to teach us some kind of collective lesson about over-reaching home purchases, sub-prime mortgage loans, bundling and leveraging, and short term gambling by opportunistic bankers who should have made wiser choices? Will you be more glorified if we're all humiliated through the loss of our jobs and much of our wealth? Is this what it means in the Magnificat, “And the rich he has sent empty away...?”

I don't think God orchestrates economic confusion. I don't think God revels in anyone's poverty or privation. We just read in psalm 22:
For he does not despise nor abhor the poor in their poverty;
neither does he hide his face from them; *
but when they cry to him he hears them.

I don't think that losing wealth makes us more spiritual, more loving, or purer hearted.

But I do think we're well served by listening carefully to what Jesus tells us. He needs us to keep our priorities straight. He knows that amassing wealth, and looking after it, can distract us from the most critical issues of living joyfully and well. We may begin to equate falsely our own significance with our material prosperity. It is possible for us to get so preoccupied with the pursuit and maintenance of our earthly positions and prestige that we lose our grip on the real purpose of our lives. Jesus is one of the only people in the forum of world-class public speakers who will remind us of this perilous dynamic.

I know that there are people among us in this parish, people with considerable wealth, who have achieved great stature in their careers who have their priorities straight. There are probably dozens of you, but I want to sketch profiles of four exemplars to make my point. These are people who know that Christ is at the center of their lives in fair and foul weather, in prosperity and in adversity. These are people who have learned the disciplines of Christ. That is, they know the way of discipleship. They have stored up treasures in heaven through their faith and good works that no worldly upheavals can diminish.

I think of a St. Gabriel's man who was born to formidable wealth and privilege, and to the highest family expectations. I think of his father, who needed his son to know what character is, and how to confront adversity courageously. So along with the advantages of fine schooling and household servants came deliberate challenges to help the son discover the sort of confident, resourceful manhood without which he would be forever dependent on the initiative and achievement of others. He wanted his son not to have the unbecoming sense of entitlement that so frequently comes with great privilege.

While others of his social class were playing Great Gatsby games on their palatial Oceanside manors, he was sent off to work on a fishing boat for summer work. A subsequent summer, he was laying railroad tracks in North Dakota, a manual laborer doing backbreaking work, washing his laundry in a number ten can. He got to know what few people in his social class knew: how his less-privileged neighbors thought, felt, loved and hoped as they lived in empty railroad cars for the summer. He developed the inner resources that have served him for a lifetime.

The father's intentions for his son were realized, and the lad went on to shoulder serious responsibilities, to fulfill lifelong family loyalties, and to earn recognition on a national and world scale that no doubt filled his father's heart with pride and admiration. When an economic earthquake shakes me from the security of a job, it isn't this man's wealth that I want, but his wisdom, counsel, loyalty, and understanding. With these, I can find the way forward. He has a demonstrated capacity for conscientious loving

A woman in this parish has, with her husband, developed a family business. They have grown and prospered through their creative and diligent work. She knows whom she serves when she awakens each morning, and her schedule begins with engaging her loving Creator in prayer. When a tsunami rolls into Sippican Harbor and throws my life into confusion, it isn't this woman's family business that I want. It is her resplendent decency, her ingenuity, and her hopefulness that is as expansive as the blue skies above. I can picture us floating in the wreckage of boats, cottages and tree branches. I can picture her sunshiny face as she says, "I remember how you said you wanted more exercise; let's swim for shore!" With her spiritual gifts offered in generous friendship, I'll find my way to safety. She has a demonstrated capacity for conscientious loving.

A couple in this parish has risen to prominence in the corporate world. They are known to people in that sphere as the successful ones, those at the top of the heap. In my conversation with the locals, again and again, this couple's name keeps coming up. In one situation after another, I have learned of how they quietly and powerfully restore hope for those who have run aground. They are folks who invent a way forward for people who can only see a dead end. When a whirlwind throws my life into disarray, it isn't their corporate connections I want, but their steadfast compassion, their resolute determination to help. They have a demonstrated capacity for conscientious loving.

The final couple in the lineup this morning lives in one of the finest homes on the Eastern Seaboard. They have academic credentials from extraordinary schools. They have held positions of corporate and charitable board leadership. And if my life is turned inside-out by bad luck, bad judgment, by economic depression or by the outbreak of war, it isn't their sumptuous home and gardens that I want. It isn't a letter of reference to the selective college... I would turn to them for their generous encouragement; for their attention, freely offered; for their ingenious kindness, finding imaginative ways to help others' dreams come true. They have a demonstrated capacity for conscientious loving.

Jesus tells us the truth. The real treasures aren't measured in dollars and cents. They are the gifts of our loving God, shared through those who believe.

Where our treasures are, there our hearts will be also.