

Marquand Chapel
Monday, October 24, 2005

God and Mammon
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The reading is from the lectionary for Sunday and so for the whole week. I want to talk to you about the feeling of guilt about our use of money. I confess that I feel guilty about this much of the time, in a vague and unfocussed way. I don't think we are supposed to live with guilty feelings much of the time. So I feel guilty about feeling guilty, and that doesn't do much good either.

You cannot serve two masters, Jesus says. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Mammon. To serve Mammon is to choose to put Mammon first, over God, and the heart here follows what we value, or where we put our treasure, treasures on earth or treasures in heaven.

Most people do not put money first in the sense of making it their highest intrinsic value, or something good in itself. This is because money simply is not something good in itself; it is only good because of what we can get with it. But if most people do not make this mistake, how can the love of money be 'a root of all kinds of evil', as Paul says to Timothy? I think the trouble is a wrong or disordered ranking of value. This is true with most kinds of idolatry. What money promises to give us is a kind of freedom, and this freedom is indeed good, something it is worth wanting to have. But the question is, how great a good and how it is to be ranked against the other good things that God offers us. What kind of freedom am I talking about? I want to divide this into three. It is the freedom to consume, and indeed in North America we have an abundance of this freedom. The cereal aisle at Stop and Shop is 75 feet long. I measured it on Saturday. And it offers over 200 kinds of boxes of cold cereal, and 67 for hot cereal. Second, money offers a kind of freedom from worry. This is itself a good thing, but not if we serve Mammon to get it. And, third, it promises the freedom of independence from other people, of self-sufficiency. This freedom resists any limit from the needs of other people. Let me give you an example. Suppose I have been working hard, and I want to reward myself with a movie. What could be wrong with that? Am I not free to spend my money as I want? But when I spend my nine dollars for the movie, I resist the thought that nine dollars would keep someone alive for a week in many places on this earth. There are over a billion people who live on less than a dollar a day, and many of them are starving. We can think of this in Christian terms like this. Jesus tells us that whenever we feed those who are hungry, we are doing it to him. Now suppose, since we have given our lives to him, we give him the choice. Which is more important to you, Jesus. seeing the movie, or staying alive for a week?

Our daughter Catherine was working in Zambia in a village out in the bush, and we went to visit her. It was routine at the end of the dry season for a family to have to decide which child was going to die, since not all of them could be fed, especially now

that the extended family is bursting because of the AIDS epidemic. Sometimes I have asked myself, Suppose I had to step over the starving child in order to get my ticket?

And of course it is not just the movie. My wife and I have recently put a new kitchen and bathroom in our house. It cost thousands and thousands of dollars. And we have just been watching the effects of Katrina, and now the earthquakes in Kashmir, and the horrendous deprivations these have caused. I taught there on the Indian side of the border for about a year, and I know the terrain; and when I was there I lived on about twelve dollars a month, now about 25 dollars, which had to pay for all my food. I mention the movie because I don't want you to say: It's all very well for you to talk about guilt. You have a fat salary, and you don't know what it is really like to struggle. I expect it is true that it is appropriate for me in my situation feel more guilt, but I think we all face this problem of the terrible gap between the way we live and the needs of the rest of the world.

I mention this feeling of guilt, however, not in order to end with it, but because I think there is a way to begin to deal with it. I have been helped by what I call 'the principle of providential proximity'. This is a fancy name for something straightforward. God puts us next to the people God wants us to help. The Good Samaritan saw the wounded traveler by the side of the road, and he was moved to compassion, literally moved in the guts. If we are faced with the needs of the whole world, given our own resources, there is nothing but despair. How can we do anything? But suppose God puts us next to the people we are supposed to help? You will say, 'But that is not enough. If I help just the people I know, what will happen to the victims of Katrina and the earthquakes, or those who are starving at the end of the dry season in Zambia?' I think this is right. But now we come to the church. God has, through providence, put us in a particular community of the faithful. I take this very seriously. I know that we choose which church to go to, and there is a tendency to think of this as no different in principle from choosing what socks to wear in the morning. But I think God does call us to membership in a particular community of the faithful. And this community in turn extends itself outwards to the needs of the world. It is slightly different, I think, at YDS because we may not be members of churches, but of this community here; but the principle is the same.

Suppose my local community of faith commits itself to some local program in New Haven meeting local need, for example a shelter for abused women, and also commits itself to some village in Zambia. Then that shelter becomes my shelter and that village my village. Perhaps the village next door has just as many needs as my village. They both need a well for fresh water, and textbooks for the children, and new drought-resistant crops. But we can have hope that the aid agencies have sorted out which villages will be covered by which agencies. This is how it is in fact in Zambia, for example, and in Bangladesh. If we adopt a particular village in this way, it will be ours. God has put them next to us.

If the church is to work in this way, it has to be a certain sort of place. It has to be the kind of place, first that welcomes us in, so that it can form us by forming who we see

ourselves to be. This is not at all easy, because it requires the kinds of bonding that only happens when people genuinely care for each other. Then it has to extend itself outwards to the needs of the world, so that we can be extended outwards with it, and get new neighbors in the way I have described. One difficulty is that the kind of place that is good at enfolding people is often not the kind of place that is good at extending outwards to the rest of the world.

The principle of providential proximity does not solve all the problems. How much does God expect us to give, even after we have chosen to be neighbors to these particular people? I do not know how to give an exact answer to this kind of question. Perhaps we should tithe. I know that I have found this a relief, like a kind of base-line. I feel that I can then sometimes go to the movie, though not all the time, and perhaps even (though I am still not completely at ease about this) put in a kitchen.

I have been holding up to you a suggestion about how to apply the doctrine of the church as a way to give us direction. Imagine that all Christians tithed to the church, and that all churches were outward-looking and extended their membership into the world in the way I have been describing. We could together make a very significant difference. I am not saying that this would be enough. I think our government needs to be involved as well, and it is in fact very stingy, when compared with governments in the rest of the world and the proportion of incoming resources that they give to foreign aid of a non-military kind. There will also be individual gifts we can give not through the local church, but because of other attachments we may have. So there will always be more we could do. But I think what I have suggested is a way to have the beginning of peace.

Dear God, we ask you to put us next to the people you want us to help, and next to the people you want to give help to us. In Jesus' name, Amen.