

Matthew 6:24-34  
May 25, 2008

South Plains  
8<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time

### Today's Consuming Trouble

Among the beloved sayings of Jesus from the Sermon on the Mount, most of us remember these fragments: "You cannot serve God and wealth [or Mammon]." And "Today's trouble is enough for today." A large part of our trouble today, May 25, 2008, is wealth or the lack of it. Gas prices have sky-rocketed for the summer and the economic prognosticators tell us that they are not likely to go down. Whether or not the country is in a recession, people in the United States are worried about tomorrow. Christians and other people of good will are also worried about food and drink and clothing for our neighbors in Myanmar and China. We do not want to serve Mammon, but we know that we need to use Mammon to serve our needs and the needs of the world.

Jesus had a lot to say about money. He not only spoke directly about the hazards of wealth as he does here in Matthew 6, also he used money in his parables to talk about the kingdom of heaven. Jesus was not an economist. He was not a rich man who came from a family experienced in handling large sums of money. So, why did Jesus stick his nose into a part of life he knew so little about? I think the answer is obvious. From Jesus' point of view, the way we spend, save and give away

money tells more about our faith than the way we pray and praise God.

Israel in Old Testament times hardly had a money economy. They had money, but most people didn't need a lot of money to transact the daily business of living. What you did not produce or make yourself on the farm, you could get by exchanging what you had for what someone else had. Nevertheless, Old Testament people lived with the temptations associated with accumulating wealth, wealth of various kinds, just as we do today.

Since the economy is so much in the news these days, it seems that this would be a good time to review some biblical passages about the ordinary economic decisions that everyone makes. Perhaps there is a faith healing for our trouble with consumption.

When the book of Deuteronomy gives these instructions about loans, for example, the subject is not jumbo mortgages or corporate buyouts. The focus here is on the simple act of lending goods to a neighbor in need. It was permissible for the lender to hold collateral. For instance, you might lend me a sack of flour and hold my grandmother's quilt as a pledge that I would pay you back. But, there are limits imposed on the lender to how he or she would hold that collateral. If I am poor, you cannot keep the quilt overnight, because I will need it to keep warm. Imagine the trouble of getting my quilt every morning and returning it every night. The emphasis, you

see, is on creating neighborliness, a community of concern or the covenant community.

That same goal is reflected in the way crops are harvested. The big farmer leaves some of his grain standing in the field and some of the olives hanging on his trees so that poor people and aliens, even illegal aliens, can harvest the leftovers for themselves. Love for neighbor puts a limit on our consumption.

I remember one North Carolina elder with four children and his mother-in-law living at home. Even with that large family, he always planted more garden than he needed. When the snap beans, corn and tomatoes were ripe, he would invite the neighbors to help themselves, especially the needy. We were gleaners in those days and it was a wonderful boost to our budget.

When we turn to the teachings of Jesus, the situation has changed. The first hearers of the Sermon on the Mount were disciples, disciples who follow Jesus around Galilee, those who would become the nucleus of the Christian church. They have left their fishing nets and abandoned their plows. They are not collecting unemployment. They depend on the generosity of the people to whom they take the good news of the kingdom. To them Jesus says,

Do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more

than food, and the body more than clothing?

Those early disciples were as unprotected as the birds of the air. They had to depend on the providence of Almighty God for each meal and each night's lodging. Jesus wants them to know that this not just a road trip, a cross-country adventure to live off the land. They have a mission more important than their own comfort. They are spreading the gospel. They are striving "first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness." Because they are doing God's work. God will reward them. "All these things will be given to you as well (6:33)." During the ministry of Jesus and in the time of the Acts of the Apostles, the followers of Jesus hung on to these words for dear life, literally.

I don't run into many Christians these days who depend wholly on either random or providential acts of kindness for food, drink and clothing. But, it is not unusual to meet Christians who have exchanged big, corporate incomes for smaller, less dependable salaries. Or, to meet professionals who give up vacations and billable hours for pro bono work at home or on the mission field. They challenge our faith to follow their example. They no longer live to consume. They live to give.

A generation or two later, when this book gathered up the sayings of Jesus and wrote them down in a single work we call the Gospel According to Matthew, the

situation of the church was beginning to look more like our own time. Many Christians were more settled. They worked six days and worshiped on the Lord's Day. Matthew's Gospel addresses them:

"No one can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth."

Sometimes we read, "You cannot serve God and Mammon." Mammon is not a Greek word; nevertheless it appears in the Greek text as a symbol for that master who rules so much of our lives, for the source of so much of our anxiety, for the object of so much hunger and thirst. I am not saying we will do anything for money. But, we can and do justify almost anything we do by invoking our need for money.

We live in a consumer society. The government expects us to spend those checks for \$600 and \$1200 in order to help the national economy. One of the critical numbers we watch every month is consumer spending. Have you noticed that as spending slows down, advertising in the media gets more frantic. Maybe the devil does wear Prada, and he wants all of wearing Prada.

Jesus says, "Why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you even Solomon in all his

glory was not clothed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you – you of little faith (6:28-30)?"

This little bit of poetry lifts our drooping spirits away from the single-minded pursuit of financial security and toward the security of God's kingdom. Seek the things that last. Put your best energy into Christ's mission of love. Invest yourself in values that pay the sure dividends: love, kindness, peace, humility, patience, gentleness, and courage.

This is not other-worldliness, but a more modest worldliness that sees our personal wants and desires in relation to the needs of every creature, and seeks to find our place, not on top, but beside Jesus.

I have no idea whether our children will be better off than we are today. I suspect some will be richer and some will be poorer, at least in things. I pray we will set an example for them of living for more than economic security so that they can glory in this beautiful world without just using it to accumulate more stuff,

So that they can trust in the Creator who made the beauty of springtime,

So that they can give their lives to a kingdom that endures forever,

So they can be happy, content with God's good gifts.

And, so that we all can serve that one Lord who knows what we need, and has prepared for us not only a kingdom of things that will be consumed and disappear, but also a kingdom that lasts forever.