

UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST in SIMI VALLEY
Twenty-first Sunday After Pentecost - October 24, 2004
Anne G. Cohen

Luke 18:9-14

For Our Reflection:

A country possessed of the might of the United States might do better to go into its closet and pray to its Father in secret rather than standing on the street corners parading its piety before men. - A. Roy Eckardt, in *Christian Century* (November 17, 1954)

Taxes, after all, are the dues that we pay for the privileges of membership in an organized society.
- Franklin D. Roosevelt, 32nd President of the U.S.A.(1882-1945)

Nobody Expects the I.R.S.

What are the two things we are not supposed to talk about in church?
Sex and money.

Why aren't we supposed to talk about sex and money in church?

- It's not polite.
- These are personal issues – between me and God.
- We don't air our dirty laundry in front of God and Everyone.
- We experience shame or embarrassment about having less than others – or having more than others – or being different from others.

We are taught not to compare paychecks at work because it is rude. To do so would also reveal the inequities of some payrolls in some companies.

We are taught not to count our money in front of others – not to flaunt our relative wealth – and not to tempt the “poor” – as they are likely to commit theft (unlike the rich who have all that they need and therefore would never be tempted to rip off other people).

We are taught that money and sex are dirty and shameful things that we should only share with those we love the best – and then they can be beautiful and sacred things. Our culture – along with many others – is a bit schizophrenic when it comes to these issues.

We keep our sexual practices and orientations secret – which means they have shock value if revealed – which means that our society has now exploited and incorporated sex into the heart of almost every form of entertainment, advertising and political process.

We treat money as if it is dirty and shameful – so it, too, has been exploited and incorporated into the heart of nearly every form of entertainment, advertising and political process.

The most popular entertainment is to watch a bunch of scantily clad women hurtling themselves at a bachelor because they think he has a million dollars. Throw in product placement and a Clinton joke – you've got ads and politics too.

Why would we WANT to import this trashy culture into our church experience? Who in their right mind would toxify a sacred, spiritual environment with such worldly and ugly and confusing things like sex and money?

As we found out in the Open and Affirming Process, we HAVE to talk about sex here – in order to reclaim it as the beautiful gift of God that affects and lives within all of our relationships. The church HAS to reintegrate body and soul if it is to be relevant to human beings – to our lives in these times and this culture.

The same thing is true of money. We HAVE to detoxify money so that we can learn to use our resources mindfully and lovingly.

In our culture, poor people are demonized by rich - because of the belief that a lack of financial resources signifies filth, ignorance, poor decision-making, and – ultimately a life of thievery and crime.

Never mind that the vast majority of theft is committed by people who already have plenty of financial resources.

Rich people are demonized by poor people and Democrats – because an excess of financial resources signifies exploitation, hoarding and a lack of compassion.

Never mind that rich people have often funded compassion in all forms – from public education to immunizations, from stem-cell research to agricultural experiments in Peru.

We forget that poor people are not inherently more or less good or compassionate or self-absorbed or fiscally responsible than rich people.

Whatever resources we have, we use them for good or for naught – because of the values we hold. And values go beyond financial/social class, race or the amount of sexual activity someone has in a given month.

The WAY that we use our resources has much more to do with our attitudes – which are driven by our values.

So, what BETTER place to discuss things like money, values and attitudes – than in church – within a community of accountability and grace? Jesus talked more about money than any other issue – more than he talked about marriage or family or prayer or bread and wine. And he, too, talked about it as a matter of attitude and values.

Jesus didn't dis the Pharisee because he was upper class and part of a religious hierarchy. He criticized the guy for doing all the right things for all the wrong reasons. His attitude sucked – which indicated that his values were screwed up.

How many of us have said prayers that were similar to his? “Thank you God for not making me like that other person. There but for Your Grace I go!” Such prayers limit the scope of God’s Grace and make claims of superiority for our own character and point of view. Such prayers indicate that we have an attitude challenge – we need to reexamine the values motivating our choices.

On the other hand, Jesus did not lift up the tax collector as an exemplary citizen merely because he was an outcast in his own society (which viewed him as a Roman collaborator and may have had very good reasons for disdaining him). Jesus blessed the man for his attitude – and his awareness of his own wrong-doing – his desire to live more closely aligned with his values.

We NEED to talk about money in church. If we do, we may even learn something from that can help another person. We might even find a justice issue or two that needs addressing. We might even find that money is at the heart of a spiritual issue or two.

Edward Hays, a Catholic priest, has offered some guidelines to help us develop a spirituality of money:

- (a) First, we should love our money and take pride in it. It is good to be proud of having earned it, for money is one sign of a job well done. Every paycheck is a pat on the back. [Interesting, coming from a subsidized Catholic priest – but he has a point...]
- (b) Next, mindful that our money is a sacrament in which we can say, “This is me...this is my sweat and toil...,” we should use it to nourish our bodies, which it represents. So, part of our income goes for food, clothing, shelter, and also for entertainment and fun. This expression of self-love is good and holy.
- (c) The dollar bills in your billfold are not only a sign of you, but also of the community to which you belong. They are the frequent reminder that you belong to a certain nation whose money you use symbolically. So, with part of your money you pay taxes. You should rejoice that this community of self helps to build highways, pay teachers’ salaries and patch up the potholes in the street in front of your house... [I would add that when our house catches fire, we like to have professional firefighters show up to save it. And we enjoy living in a society where there is some form of order and cooperation - and close to a common understanding about the rules of engagement and commerce. We pay taxes because we value the common good and pledge our loyalty to and participation in a free AND orderly society. To withhold taxes for our own gain when others less fortunate are dependent upon us – is a breach of trust.]
- (d) Some of your money goes into our Social Security system and is given to the elderly and the needy. So, a part of you puts food on the plate of some aged man or woman or helps pay the rent of an elderly person. By means of this withholding payment you are able to put flesh on the words that Jesus speaks about seeing him in those who are in need...

(e) Finally, in numerous ways we are inclined to use parts of our money on gifts to those we love, to friends and to those organizations and activities we feel are important to the world and to the growth of the human spirit. Whenever we give a gift of money we could seal it with a kiss or a wink...saying, "This is my body... this is me... this is my love."

(Hays, Secular Sanctity, in Brussat pp.314-15)

If money is dirty and evil, then the church shouldn't dirty its hands with any of it. If money is a blessing – our bodies given for the common good with passion and compassion – then we SHOULD be able to talk about it openly in our spiritual community.

Money and social class are not inherently good or evil. The way that we view and use our resources, the values we are expressing in our actions and in our attitudes, are what is worthy of judgment.

Joe Dominguez and Vicki Robin, in their best-seller Your Money or Your Life, point out that how we spend our money is a direct reflection of our values. It is an important spiritual practice to look at our spending habits and the percentages of our income that are spent, given away, saved and wasted.

Do we proclaim that we are concerned about exploited workers? Do we then shop at Wal-Mart or purchase clothing or food without paying attention to the source or the form of manufacture?

What are our passions? Do we value education or art or health? How much of our income do we invest in the promotion of education or art or health – our own and that of our common life?

Do we really value our spiritual life and the community of accountability and grace that we encounter at church? How much of our income do we invest in that community?

What is it worth to us? We just need to check our financial ledger for the last year to find out.

Marilyn Chandler McEntyre in a recent article in a Christian journal reminds us that:

All spiritual practices can be perverted by a spirit of self-righteousness [and] judgment... It is altogether too easy to parade our responsible secondhand clothing or fair-trade coffee as a badge of political and spiritual correctness, and to ignore the genuine needs of our nearest neighbor in attending to the distant poor. Or, just as bad, to become legalistic to the point of self-flagellation and miss the grace that makes all things permitted, though not all are useful... It is not our works that make us righteous, nor do they contribute to our spiritual welfare in any way unless they are grounded and steeped in prayer – the offerings [are] brought to the temple not because they are sufficient, but because they are a way of staying in love.

("Too Much With Us," Weavings, Sept./Oct. 2004, p.45)

I will send us out from here with a prayer that McEntyre modeled on the Prayer of St. Francis – a prayer that might guide us as we choose our financial paths:

Lord, make me an instrument of your justice:
Where there is greed, let me practice generosity;
Where there is excess, moderation;
Where there is selfishness, compassion...
O Master, grant that I may never seek
So much to be comfortable as to comfort;
To be satisfied as to satisfy;
To be fed as to feed;
To have as to share.

(“Too Much With Us,” Weavings, Sept./Oct. 2004, p.40)

TWENTY-FIRST SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST
UCC Higher Education Sunday
United Nations Sunday

October 24, 2004

10:00 a.m.

The cross marks (+) in the order of service are an invitation for those in the congregation who are able to stand to do so.

The New Century Hymnal or “Hymnal” has a black cover; prayers are in the back.

The Chapel Songbook or “CSB” is a blue, looseleaf notebook.

When the bell rings you are invited to engage in reflection and quiet listening.

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WE GATHER FOR PRAYER AND CELEBRATION

Musical Call to Worship

Welcome and Perspective on the Day

Please give the minister your announcements in writing before the service.

Music for Reflection – A Time for Centering

+ **Call to Worship** (unison)

**The Dayspring has dawned upon us from on high
to give light to those who live in darkness
and to guide our feet into the way of peace.**

+ **Opening Hymn**

God Reigns o'er All the Earth

Hymnal # 21

+ **Prayer of Eusebius** (unison)

May I be an enemy to no one and the friend of what abides eternally.

May I never quarrel with those nearest me,
and be reconciled quickly if I should.
May I never plot evil against others, and if anyone plot evil against me
may I escape unharmed and without the need to hurt anyone else.

May I love, seek, and attain only what is good.
May I desire happiness for all and harbor envy for none.
May I never find joy in the misfortune of one who has wronged me.
May I never wait for the rebuke of others,
but always rebuke myself until I make reparation....

May I gain no victory that harms me or my opponent...
May I reconcile friends who are angry with each other.
May I, insofar as I can, give all necessary help to my friends
and to all who are in need.
May I never fail a friend in trouble.
When visiting the grief-stricken,
may I be able to soften their pain with comforting words.

May I respect myself...
May I always maintain control of my passions...
May I habituate myself to be gentle,
and never be angry with others because of circumstances.
May I never discuss the wicked or what they have done,
but know good people, and follow in their footsteps.

+ **Our Common Prayer** (unison)

Creator God who art in heaven,
Hallowed be thy name.
Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done,
on Earth as it is in Heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread,
And forgive us our debts
As we forgive our debtors.
And lead us not into temptation,
But deliver us from evil,
For Thine is the kingdom and the power
And the glory forever. Amen.

Time for Silent Reflection (you may be seated)

One: My soul waits in silence.

All: God is my rock and my fortress. I will be at peace.

Silent Reflection

The Assurance of Good News (unison)

God is our Dayspring Who guides our feet into the way of Peace.

Sung Response "Hallelujah... God be praised!" (CSB #5 Refrain)

WE TEACH, REFLECT AND PROCLAIM

The Just Peace Reflection was introduced to our worship service by our Just Peace Committee.

It is a weekly reminder of the need for social justice in order to create a peaceful world.

Just Peace Reflection

Conversation with Our Children

Reading from the Christian Gospel of Luke 18:9-14

Sermon Nobody Expects the I.R.S.

WE RESPOND TO GOD'S INVITATION

Intercessions, Celebrations and Encouragements

Our Joys and Concerns

Call to Prayer *Be still and know that I am God* Hymnal # 743

Time for Silence

Offering of Prayer

Sung Response *In Solitude* Hymnal #521 vv. 1 & 2

We Offer Our Gifts So That Our Lives May Be Our Prayer

Offertory

Prayer of Dedication (unison)

May the blessing of God, whose praise fills the whole earth, fill all of our lives with praise this day and forever. Amen.

+ Sending Hymn *Take My Gifts* Hymnal # 562

+ Commissioning (unison)

May the God who has delivered, led and taught us through the generations bless us this day with hearts filled with praise and wills devoted to Her ways. Amen.

+ Sung Response (You are welcome to form a circle) Hymnal # 236

**Halle, halle, halle – lu – ja, Halle, halle, halle – lu – ja,
Halle, halle, halle – lu – ja, Halleluja, halleluja.**

+ Postlude

WORSHIP NOTES

Call to Worship is from Swallow's Nest by Marchiene Vroon Rienstra c.1992 (p.167)

Prayer of Eusebius is by Eusebius of Caesarea, c.260-c.339, found in Ibid. (pp.172-73)

Prayer of Dedication Ibid. (p.173)

Commissioning Ibid. (p.169)