Mammon and Mastery

Texts on Sunday, July 15, 2012
1 Kings 21; Luke 16: 1-15

In 1908, Winston Churchill wrote, "The seed of Imperial ruin and national decay [lies in] the unnatural gap between the rich and the poor [and] the swift increase of vulgar . . . luxury." In the same decade, Republican President Teddy Roosevelt said, "The supreme political task of our day is to drive the special interests out of our public life." A generation later, his cousin President Franklin Roosevelt would offer that "political equality is meaningless in the face of economic inequality." Justice Louis Brandeis of the U.S. Supreme Court framed his concern in ominous terms: "We can have a democracy, or we can have great wealth in the hands of a comparative few, but we cannot have both." There would have been no five citizens united on the bench of the Supreme Court were the wisdom of Brandeis still moving in high places in America. But no one in high places believes any of these things anymore. Why not add one more famous man's words to this anthology? When the devil took Jesus up to the high places and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and promised him all, saying "all their glory and all this authority will I give you; for it has been given over to me, and I give it to anyone I please; if you, then, will worship me," Jesus answered him, "It is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and him only shall you serve.'" (Luke 4:5) Or, in other words which you just heard from those same so-quotable lips, "You cannot serve God and Mammon."

But no one in high places believes this any longer. If they do, they dare not say so, for fear the higher-ups will yank their feeding tube from the Wall...Street. Mammon is master. You have seen the charts showing that the wealth of America has accrued to the wealthiest Americans in astounding measure over the last thirty years. In the first decade of this century, the top tenth of one percent of all households—one of every thousand—gulped down one fifth of the nation's income. America's richest 400 families now own more wealth than the poorest 185 million of us put together. The causes and causers of the 2008 crash have gone unexamined, unpunished, and unfixed. Never has it been more certain that big banks will not undergo bank-rupture, to coin a phrase, no matter whose money they gamble with; but oh, didn't the big banks swing the senators of both parties around their scribbling pens when it came to needing laws to put personal bankruptcy out of reach for desperate households?

For almost 100 years, New York State's so-called bucket laws made the worst excesses of bank gambling illegal, but when Congress repealed the Glass-Steagall Act a dozen years ago, New York was no longer permitted to protect itself from the devil in high places. Is it quite believable that the CEOs of two immense banks in the news these days, both guilty of gambling and lying, both have

"Di(a)mon(d)" on the souls of their shoes? Let's finish our ride through this house of horrors—this mansion of Mammon—with one more fact. Only in the coming months will we fully feel the effects of the Supreme Court's Citizens United decision, permitting any amount of private money to turn our elections. One partisan promises to shovel into the beast $100,000,000 of his so-called personal wealth to elect a different president. Money is master in every quarter of our public life. Can we any longer call our nation a democracy? It is a plutocracy, with election theater on the main stage now! Not citizens are we, but subjects, rather. And here's the rub. We ourselves are responsible for abdicating the throne of our citizenship. We let it slip away. Why? Shall we say the power of money has stunned us all, and too few have awakened to self-mastery?

I think that is what Jesus would say. Let it bear upon our conscience that for almost three thousand years, the scriptural traditions of the west have warned with utmost clarity that the love of money soon enough destroys every good thing. That awesome tale of King Ahab desiring a plot of land, and passively letting his wife manage the details of killing its owner, so that he might have his wine his way sounds like a parable of the mortgage madness of our day. It may have worked like that even at first, for the tale is not historical. (Read the deep scholarship; it is a legend about Ahab.) But let's not miss this. When the Jews needed a new word to bestir themselves to self-protection and self-government, lest they fail utterly of national purpose, the tale they told was of this long-dead king with a belly full of wants but no guts, governed by an alien personality who knew no god but money. Jesus was not inventing when he said you cannot serve God and mammon. It was the sober-minded spiritual psychology of the ages.

Let us get something straight about the Master. If God is all in all, God does not need our praise and worship to delight Godself. If God delights in our worship, it is for one reason only. True worship is for our own good. It sets us in right relation with our creator. Its proof is this: true worship shows up as good for all. True worship is a synonym for the practices and habits of mind that lead to the greatest possible happiness for humans. To serve God, then, is shorthand for living the best life possible. Yet to do that, you would have to know what a human life is for, just as you need to know what a machine is for in order to use it well. At the heart of America's political dysfunction and moral woe is plain confusion over what a human life is for. Money is at the heart of that confusion.

In a recent book called The Obama Question, our friend Prof. Gary Dorrien from Union Seminary frames the American confusion in two panes—in two wings, you might say. One wing beats for unrestricted liberty to acquire wealth; the other for self-government, that is, for the right of a majority to prioritize all public values, including how wealth is to be formed, held, and shared. Naturally, political blocs form around these competing, beating wings, but politics obscure a deeper reality, for not just some, but all of us are split by our need of money and of self-government. Yet few see that while the two wings are both

necessary to societal function, an absolute hierarchy of value rules here: Exactly to the degree we prioritize the liberty to make money, we lose self-government.

The crisis is spiritual—which is another way of saying that these two values put the meaning of human life in dispute. To serve God (the term is too dense for us; we must use it sparingly, and never with respect to duties squarely accomplished) means that we desire to use material things to stay in touch with reality! To stay in touch with the mystery and wonder and power of the being being sent into us instant by instant by our Creator. Can you serve God in the intimacy of your bedroom? Absolutely! Can you despise God there? Why ask! Can you serve God in the boardroom? Can you despise God in the boardroom? You know! In the eye of Spirit, a human becomes a real person to the degree she learns that no thing has meaning in itself; that "every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the Father of lights." (James 1:17) The poet Rainer Maria Rilke offers a feeling for such right relation with things:

> … when the traveler returns from the mountain-slopes into the valley,
> he brings, not a handful of earth, unsayable to others, but instead
> some word he has gained, some pure word, the yellow and blue
> gentian. Perhaps we are here in order to say: house,
> bridge, fountain, gate, picture, fruit-tree, window —
> at most: column, tower… But to say them, you must understand,
> oh to say them more intensely than the Things themselves
> ever dreamed of existing. Isn't the secret intent
> of this taciturn earth, when it forces lovers together,
> that inside their boundless emotion all things may shudder with joy?

The scriptures of all the world have one mind in this matter: the eye of human consciousness must cause the things below to serve the things above, else lose track of all purpose whatsoever.

The phrase "the love of money" is just as obscure to our minds as is "to serve God." The love of money has nothing to do with that silly cartoon of a rich man obsessing over a pile of gold ducats in his possession. It really hasn't to do with rich people at all, for some are wise and spiritual, and some are not. The philosopher Jacob Needleman offers this to deepen our understanding:

> "Money is so essential in our lives because it now embodies the central problem of our life on earth—the dominance of the principle of . . . the ego. [T]he ego is far more than just vanity in its obvious forms. It is the belief in one's power to do—to be safe, happy, and fulfilled by one's own efforts —without the help of a higher influence." (Money and the Meaning of Life, p. 278, 295)

In other words, money is both the symbol and the instrument of our self-creation. Because money expresses our ego, the love of money can best be thought of as the visible expression of our love of our own self above all other realities—our small self, that is, whose passing away we cannot abide.

The tragedy of Western civilization has this character, that as by our industriousness we have lengthened the span of life for hundreds of millions and eased life's pains and added comforts in a manner undreamed by pre-industrial

peoples, so we have really settled down here on earth and have come to believe our own myths, that we alone make our long life ill or easy; that nothing is given, but only earned; that even more goods are possible in the future and therefore our salvation lies in living a bit longer; and that the only thing worth saving is money—to help with that future. In a word, we are a people never content, rarely searching in our own depths for a peace that passes understanding, ever complaining about what others haven't done to improve our lot; living and believing as if we cannot be happy without the stuff we suppose we must have. In this, we have become the most untrusting and atheistic of peoples, say our prayers though we do. This is what the love of money means.

We have utterly forgotten what we are here for; why we were given these deep eyes to see. To see what is real was the source of our true self-government, of that strength of which the apostle speaks, saying, "I have learned to be content in whatever state I am." Having forsaken true self-government within to dreams of boats and bigger houses, is it any wonder that we have abandoned self-government without, and lost our crown? The wild greed of Wall Street and the heedless cooperation afforded the powerful by elected representatives of all parties are but a gigantic parody of the purposeless self-service which has landed in us as the love of money—which has ultimately infected and afflicted every empire on earth and brought them all to their knees after a season of unlimited overreach. How absurd, how tragic, how predictable that the pendulum of power, unhinged from any purpose but its own augmentation, should swing through the glass of the Master's clock, aiming to grow on for eternity.

Listen. The word vote comes from the Latin for voice. The assault of wealth and power upon the government of this people is a Babel-builder's dream of unrestrained, money-maddened voices drowning out all reason. But their voices can be silenced by the Master's voice. The Master, however, has renounced forever the power to speak law from heaven on high. The Master speaks only through the Body now—through self-mastery and self-government. Therefore, do not despair and do not forsake your crown. The connection between your inner self-government and just government of the people, by the people, for the people—; the connection between spiritual fortitude and real citizenship—; the connection between the love of Christ and servant leadership for an unspiritual people satisfied by mammon and unprepared for hardship—: these connections have never been more sorely needed from those of God who feel what it is to be ready to live and to die in the Lord. Do not suppose that things above have nothing to do with the things below. In you, heaven and earth may touch, giving you mastery over money and self, over your speech and your voice—and your vote. What is wanting is the word of truth which sees and says what a human life is for. Progress will come through the voice of the Spirit. Listen.

Rev. Stephen H. Phelps
The Riverside Church
in the City of New York
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