

25th Sunday of Ordinary Time “Mammon and Discipleship”

Bishop Frank Schuster

A young man once asked God how long a million years was to him. God replied, "A million years to me is just like a single second to you." The young man asked God what a million dollars was to him. God replied, "A million dollars to me is just like a single penny to you." Then the young man got his courage up and asked, "God, could I have one of your pennies?" God smiled and replied, "Sure, just a second." --Anonymous

That joke is brought to you by Professor Anonymous. He is a funny guy, Professor Anonymous. I share it with you because, in our Gospel reading this weekend, Jesus says that we cannot serve both God and mammon. Jesus is asking us to make God the priority in everything. Of course, mammon is commonly misunderstood as referring to just money. The idea of mammon is a little more complex. Mammon is defined by Webster's as "riches, greed, and worldly gain personified as a false god in the New Testament." Mammon is defined as "riches considered as an evil influence of object or worship." Instead of the question, what do I own, the question becomes, what owns me? That's mammon.

You see, money is a neutral thing, neither good nor evil. Money is a means to an end whereby we can get things necessary for our well-being, and the well-being of our family and community. Mammon, however, is the perversion whereby money or possessions cease to be the means to an end and rather becomes the end unto itself, thereby manifesting itself as more important than God and the people around us as we see so clearly in the first reading from the Prophet Amos.

My friends, when money, riches or possessions become more important than our family members, for example, we know that money ceases to be neutral. Whenever we treat other human beings solely as a means for obtaining money, for example, money ceases to be money and becomes mammon. For example, I have no problem with that shiny new car some people can afford. From my perspective, the people who build and sell these cars have children with braces too and shiny new cars can be a lot of fun if you can truly afford them. On the other hand, if owning a shiny new car is something you can't really afford or somehow becomes more important than the needs of your family, or the education or well-being of your children, or doing your part for the care of your community, (especially the poor!), Houston we have a problem. It is a priority issue. Money becomes mammon.

There are many of us here who are good stewards of their money. There are many of us here who are working on it. Good stewards don't get caught by credit card debt. Good stewards don't buy things that they can't afford. They have savings to draw from when unexpected things happen. They give their first fruits to God, which is to say they plan their giving to the Church and other worthy organizations rather than giving what happens to be left over at the end of the month. They understand that people are more important than profit, like our shrewd steward discovered in our Gospel today.

I think our grandparents' and great-grandparents' generations understood this better than our present generation. I don't think this is an overgeneralization. Tom Brokaw's book "The Greatest Generation" talked about this. In the Great Depression, there were a lot of people could literally starve to death if they couldn't find food. They simply didn't have the kind of social nets that we have today. During WW2 basic staples were rationed in this country which forced families to learn how to stretch their resources. I am going to use my grandparents as examples. Maybe you can think of your grandparents to see if any of this rings true or not.

You see, my grandparents were the most frugal people you ever could meet. How frugal was they? Well, I'll tell you. When I visited my grandparents in their older years. A running joke in my family was the morning ritual of enjoying their coffee brewed from three-day old coffee grounds. The best I can gather, coffee was rationed in WW2 and the practice of stretching the coffee grounds stuck with them over the years. Sometimes I would be asked to go grocery shopping for them. My grandfather would literally ask me to go to three different stores to pick up grocery items based on where the "deals" were for the specific items. On the other hand, I have to say my grandparents were far more generous to the Church and other worthy organizations than I was at the time. The only entertainment system in my grandparent's home was a piano and anyone was welcome to play it. Evenings were not spent in front of a screen but rather around a kitchen table sharing stories.

I mention my grandparent's generation because, given that in recent years the average credit card debt in our country is achieving record highs and personal savings are achieving record lows, it isn't hyperbole to say our generations' relationship with money, possessions and entertainment is clearly different than previous generations. Does this point to a spiritual problem in our country today? Yes, I think it does.

And so, we can ask ourselves, what does my personal relationship with money and possessions look like? Am I good steward of my resources or am I reckless? Do I put my relationship with God, family members and community first or does money and possessions come first? A good "mammon test" would be to simply ask ourselves, "what do I own and what owns me?" I think it is spiritually helpful for us to ask this question from time to time.

In that spirit, I would like to conclude with the wisdom of St. Robert Bellarmine whose feast day was last week. He writes, "If you are wise, know that you have been created for the glory of God and your own eternal salvation. This is your goal; this is the center of your life; this is the treasure of your heart. If you reach this goal, you will find happiness. If you fail to reach it, you will find misery. May you consider truly good whatever leads to your goal and truly evil whatever makes you fall away from it. Prosperity and adversity, wealth and poverty, health and sickness, honors and humiliations, life and death, in the mind of the wise man, are not to be sought for their own sake, nor avoided for their own sake. But if they contribute to the glory of God and

your eternal happiness, then they are good and should be sought. If they detract from this, they are evil and to be avoided.”

My friends, we know that God wills everyone to be saved and come to knowledge of the truth. Jesus wants us to find joy in this life and in the next. That won't happen if we put profit before people. Who wants to spend eternity with someone like that, raise your hand. This is why Jesus praised the shrewd steward in the Gospel reading today. He learned how to put people before profit, and in the exchange, accidentally modeled what Jesus did for us.