



Homily for 1/31/2021

Money

Very Rev. J. David Carter, JCL, JV

Wisdom, be attentive! Money is not a theme foreign to the pulpit. In fact, the Scriptures relate that love of money is the root of all evil, and so it becomes a moral issue for us. If we reduced the whole of the moral life to three idols, we come up with three classic idolatries: Power, Pleasure and Wealth. The remedy for these three classic idolatries is to rightly order the Will by prayer and obedience, mortify pleasure by fasting, and give away money by almsgiving. Almsgiving is the way we combat the last of the classic idolatries. “Render unto Caesar what is Caesar’s,” we love to say when tax time comes around. If truth be told, we grudgingly acknowledge this. We, of course, complain that our taxes are too high, but we hopefully recognize that through them, we are paying our debt to society. And when the basket comes around at church, are we as enthusiastic to render unto God what is God’s? When we pay our tithes, do we recognize that we also have a debt to God that cannot be paid in money but only in blood? That debt has been paid by Jesus Christ and you have been bought at a price. Now we owe him the debt of thanksgiving. To Him belong the first fruits of the goods of this world. And yet, it is the last thing we want to hear about most of the time.

My grandfather used to chide me against being “one of those priests who always talks about money!” I understand the sentiment. People will rightly ask why the Church is speaking about money. I could jokingly ask if you would want me to talk about sex, contraception, abortion and same sex marriage instead! Perhaps, more subtly, I could talk about obedience to bishops, popes, the magisterium or the other commands of the moral law, all very fun topics indeed. However, I dare to bypass them today and speak about money! Many will take up my grandfather’s chiding to stop talking about money. But let us examine why that is before we too readily chide. Why am I preaching about money? Because Jesus did. And not just once. 16 (sixteen) of the 38 (thirty-eight) parables Jesus tells his disciples talk about money and possessions. 1 (one) out of 10 (ten) Gospel verses deal directly with the subject of money (a curious nod to the biblical theme of the tithe as ten percent of one’s possessions). In the whole of the sacred Scriptures over 2,000 (two thousand) verses mention money and possessions.

But lest you think this is just a biblical thing, think to human experience at large. There are ample studies that seek to discern how many times a day the average teenager thinks about sex. I wonder if there are any studies that seek to discern how many times a day the average adult thinks about money? Lust is the deadly sin of youth and avarice the deadly sin of old age. When we are children, we are innocent of such thoughts, for the most part. But as we grow into adulthood, we begin to realize that money doesn’t grow on trees; and even if it did, we would have to expend at least enough energy and work to harvest it! We fret about money. We rejoice when we have it. We lament when we lose it. We stay awake at night figuring out how we will pay the bills. We suffer from varying degrees of greed and envy. All of this to say that humanity has an unhealthy attachment to the goods of this world as a result of original sin. At some point the wise person, or at least the person seeking wisdom, has to stop and ask, “How much do I need?” “How much is too much?” “How much is too little?” “Will my answer to these questions bring me true happiness?” Unfortunately, we very often don’t stop to ask these questions. We live in a society that is unwise and that doesn’t seek wisdom, a society that tells us that we have to run the rat-race: The one who dies with the most toys wins. You need a good college education because only college-educated people make more money. And only people with more money are happy.... What a lie all that has turned out to be! I have seen plenty of very happy and contented plumbers, carpenters and electricians and a whole heap of college graduates sad, despairing, angry and resentful because they are indebted up to their eyeballs for their degree in gender studies and feminist theory. Education has been reduced to the raw pursuit of money instead of the pursuit of wisdom. Wisdom, be attentive. If money is everything, why does all the data about human happiness point to another source?

The statistics say that one of the worst things to happen to you is to win the lottery. Google it and find out how many people’s lives were ruined by winning the lottery - bankruptcy, divorce, family strife, isolation, depression, and suicide. I believe there is a rap song that ironically captured it in an eloquent way, “mo’ money, mo’ problems.”



And yet there is still a thrill found in buying a lottery ticket, rolling the dice at the casino, or playing the stock market.

Just this week we saw an event take place in the stock market in which stockholders are attempting to squeeze hedge funds who are shorting the stock in a particular company. It is a sort of grass-roots rebellion against the big stake holders in the free market economy. It made lots of headlines. Obviously, there are lots of people concerned about money. But that is just a symptom and the tip of the iceberg when it comes to the issue of money in our society. The control of wealth is a preeminent concern for almost all people, even if they don't realize it. This is the reason why one political strategist years ago was successful when he quipped, "It's the economy, stupid!"

Now, there is a great and good debate about what the economy should look like. Those who seek the increase of a bottom line, heedless of the human toll, are part of the problem. This is the critique we rightly make as Christian people against the unchecked and unprincipled free market. Greed is a deadly sin. On the other hand, there are those who demonize people who are successful. The crusade against the rich egged on by Marxist ideologies of class warfare are infused with another equally deadly sin called envy. The trouble with this opposite extreme is that its supporters cry out for equality but don't understand that the utopia they dream of cannot exist in a world infused with the effects of original sin. To create an equality of opportunity is a noble goal that reasonable people should rally around. To create an equality of outcome, however, seems to be a utopian dream that cannot be reconciled with the human condition. Time and again people's attempts to 'right the wrong' end up in just another set of injustices. This is proven every time communism and its subtle child socialism are attempted.

At the same time that reasonable people should condemn communism, we should also be wary of radical individualism that forgets that we are all part of the human family and we are our brother's keeper. The common good is not a bad word. No man is an island unto himself, and we have a responsibility to the common good of all in a spirit of solidarity. But we also acknowledge the wisdom of St. Paul, who said, "The one who doesn't work shouldn't eat" (2 Thess 3:10). There is a moral element to the way we arrange our financial matters and our society. It is no wonder then that we think about economy and money and goods and services almost every day. We organize our lives around pursuits to gain control of it, at least enough of it to sustain our lives. But that begs the question again. What does our life consist of? What is 'enough' for us? How much should we have? If we have wisdom, we will not be quick to answer that question. It is a process of discernment that is different for every individual and is answered differently throughout life. In what does the 'good life' consist? Who do we trust to help us answer that question? I trust Jesus. I trust what the Scriptures say. I trust what the Church teaches and what she offers.

I have a gift for you. You can laugh if you want. It's ok to make light of it. I present to you the gift of opportunities. Opportunities to give money. Let me put it another way: Our parish is presenting to you a smorgasbord of opportunities to destroy the idol of money. I set before you life or death. Slavery or freedom. Idolatry or fidelity to the true God. We take up a collection each week ostensibly for the practical reason of keeping the lights on, paying the heating bill, serving the people who come through our doors with our various ministries, and sustaining our ministers. But in reality, this is just the first opportunity we give you as a Christian to slay the dragon of greed. The second opportunity will be presented to us for the next two weekends in the Bishop's Appeal. By donating to this we serve the poor through our Catholic Charities, educate our future priests and deacons, and minister to college students in our Newman Centers on campus. But it is really just one more opportunity offered to you to be counter-cultural and not let money rule your heart. The third opportunity that will be presented to you is our current Capital Campaign that has just begun. By March we will be rolling it out fully, and you will be asked to personally contribute to the rebuilding of the thing that unites three diverse communities Under One Roof. But this is just the *Coup de grâce* of the church's efforts to help you combat the idolatry of money. The martyrs of ages past were known to laugh and sing for joy in the face of persecution. When knives and swords, fire, and instruments of



torture were applied, they appealed to heaven and there found something more lasting than what the world offered. They overcame the attachment to the earthly idols of power, pleasure and wealth by their faith in the God who has the power to raise us from the dead. And so, they laughed and sang. I have never heard a story of a grumpy martyr. Almsgiving is the martyrdom of the wallet. When the basket comes around today, will we complain and curse under our breath or will we cheerfully give? When the pledge cards for the bishop's appeal are passed out next week will we curse and chide, or see a path to heaven and its lasting joy? When you get the phone call or mailing to contribute to the Under One Roof Campaign, will you harbor resentment in your heart, or will you leap for joy like John the Baptist in his mother's womb and say, "Who am I, that an opportunity to serve God has come to me?"