

“Wrestling with Priorities”



Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost
11:00 a.m. Sunday, September 18, 2016
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Camp Hill, Pennsylvania

So I owe the bank a debt. I have a car loan. I also happen to have a mortgage. I have a little credit card debt; not a lot, but enough that it's there – I'm aware of it. I'm thinking that the bank should forgive my debt. Who's with me? We'd all love that wouldn't we?

Why? What is the appeal? I borrowed the money honestly. They lent it to me in good faith. What is the appeal of being out of debt? Freedom. More money. But definitely we think about the freedom from debt as being something desirable. And yet, somehow we still manage to end up in debt. Why do we do that to ourselves? We don't want to be in debt. God tells us throughout the scriptures that we are never to be in debt to anyone but God. And yet, we somehow still manage to end up in debt. It's kind of perplexing.

But I think I have figured it out. One little factor here that we may not have considered is that you and I are not just Christians – although we are – we are also Americans. United States Americans to be precise, and our culture and our economy depends upon us borrowing money. And, it assumes that we will. It assumes that we will take out a mortgage. It assumes that we will have credit cards – they hope we have credit cards, because somebody is making money on the credit cards. They're hoping that we'll borrow money for cars. I know this because when I go to buy a car they've got about ten people in the back who will help me borrow the money to get it.

So we know that we live in a society where this is part of what we're supposed to be doing as good United States citizens. Sadly, for us, we have that other thing that I said first – we are Christians. And therefore, we may be in this world, but we are certainly not of it, and we are called to live differently.

In case you think that I'm wrong, read again the last sentence of our Gospel reading for today. “You cannot serve God and money.” Which part of that did we not understand? Seriously, what is our problem with that? I don't think Jesus got any clearer. And if you aren't sure about that one, Jesus has another 70% of his sayings and parables that deal with this issue of money. That's how much he talked about money because he knew, as well as you and I know, it's our stumbling block.

The thing is, this is what's happened. Because we live in a culture that is truly driven in some ways by money – well maybe in all ways, we can argue that later. The problem is because of that – and we are inundated with that and we live in this culture – we do tend to accept certain things about the culture. And we are quick to say, “what God has asked me to do is unrealistic.” I mean, who can buy a house without taking out a

mortgage? And if you can, please call me. Buy a car at \$30,000. I still can't get over how much cars cost. I still can't get over it. How many of you just can't believe that you go look at cars and think "There's no way this is worth that much money." And yet, we'll buy it.

God is so clear with us about how we are to live and what our priorities are supposed to be. Why then are those priorities instantly negotiable the moment that something hits us that we want, or think we need. Instantly negotiable. So, I go on vacation with my family. It's a vacation we can barely afford, but we're not doing it on credit. We saved up the money and we're using cash as we go. By the way, have you noticed that people don't take cash anymore? This is so bizarre to me.

But we're doing our thing and we see a painting that is THE painting that completely depicts this trip. It is the epitome of this family vacation. And my family that is slightly addicted to art sees the painting and says, "we have to have this."

Now, take my story and insert your "have to." How many times have you found yourself saying or thinking something like that? I have to have this. I have to have a house. I have to have a car. I have to go to that school or have that program. I have to be a part of this. I have to have cable. I have to have Netflix. I have to have. And suddenly, who's life are we living? And, on top of that, whose priority are we reflecting? Are we living a life that reflects God's priority to love God and love our neighbor and to put, by the way according to Luther's definition in the small catechism, to actually put the interests of our neighbor ahead of our own.

Are we living that life or are we living a life that says that single family dwellings are the way that we roll in this world? Cars and debt are just part of the game. Having the job, the position, the ability to increase that income is desirable. Are we playing the game that says, revenge is appropriate? If someone bombs us, we bomb them back. If someone steals from us, we steal it back. If somebody wrongs us, then we can wrong them back. Am I delusional, or is this the life we are living?

Somewhere along the way, you and I capitulated. We capitulated, brothers and sisters, and if that isn't worthy of repentance, then I don't know what is. Somewhere along the way, we accepted the world's priorities. We accepted the rules of the game and we said, "well these are the rules and we'll just play by them." I think it happened to me in first grade when the teacher put up a bulletin board about the economy and said this is the way it rolls. And I think in first grade I said, "okay that's the way it rolls. I get it."

But we capitulated. We gave up. We stopped fighting the fight. Because, somehow we thought it was too hard. It was easier to take the debt than to save the money until we could afford it. It was easier to let somebody who is clearly much smarter and wiser than I am to decide if we should bomb that country. It was easier to let somebody else make decisions for me, because if I take part in that decision-making and I truly follow what God asks me to do, it's a fight. It's a fight!

I can tell you, as someone who works with people who are trying to make planned gifts to the church, I often see this struggle in a very intimate way. People will say to me, "Well, I was raised with the family farm mentality." If you've a Pennsylvania Dutch girl, like me, then you have the family farm in your head. And the family farm scenario goes like this:

you inherit the family farm, you take care of the family farm, you make the family farm prosper so that when you hand it on to your children, there is (a) still a family farm, and (b) the family farm is doing even better than when you got it. That's the family farm mentality. And I meet people all the time who say to me, "Well, I was raised with this mentality, I know I'm supposed to leave it to my kids because somewhere I was taught that that is what I'm supposed to do. And I'm not sure there's any room for me to leave a legacy for the church." Or, "my kids are launched and I'm supposed to leave them the family farm, but quite honestly, they don't want my family farm."

We're struggling because we've been taught something and we're not sure how to reconcile it with what we know. We know that if we follow God's priority we will follow God's rules in this world for how we are to live with one another. We are to live lives of generosity. Giving away even the shirts on our back, we are to live lives that reflect the kind of sacrifice that Christ has given for us to give all of who we are and all of what we're made of so that God's will on earth will be reflected on us, the feeble likes that we are. You don't need me coming in here on the first Sunday of your stewardship bang telling you something that you already know. You know what I am telling you, you know that God has a priority for your life that is often at odds with what is being told to you that you need to be doing instead.

Brothers and sisters, coming here on Sunday morning is about getting fed for the fight. Receiving the forgiveness of sins and the sacrament, hearing the word of God every Sunday is about being filled and fed so that when we go out into the world God's priority has been reset in our lives and we continue to make those decisions that reflect that. On the day that you were baptized, just like on the day that I was baptized, someone held a candle by you and said these words; "Let your light so shine before others so that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven." By your works do people recognize that you are a Christian or just one of us? By the choices that we make, by the prayers that you pray, and yes by even the votes that you cast, how does the world know who you are? And whose you are? How does the world know what your priority is and therefore what is God's priority? Because I'll tell you what God's priority is. God's priority is that we would be the body of Christ as we are shaped and formed and made that. And God gives everything for that, his life, his resurrection, and all the in-betweens. God has given us everything so that we would be free to make the choices that reflect the God that gave us everything, and even more.

This is the bonus; do you want to hear the bonus? So not only do we have the word of God we get a bonus, too. It's just like going to a job and getting a pay check and a bonus. This is church. The bonus here is the gifts that you have been given are endless. I know that my bank account can hit zero. God's gifts never hit zero. And they prosper the more that we share them because they are meant to be shared. How can you share mercy without giving mercy? How can you be a vessel of peace without proclaiming peace? How can you show that God wants us to love one another without reconciling with those with whom you have broken relationships? How will the world know that salvation is something that doesn't come out of a bank account, but rather comes from a God saves and loves, if we ourselves act like we have the capability of saving ourselves. If I hear one more argument about safety and security I am going to lose my mind. I don't need safety and security. I need God. He is my safety, my security, and I am pretty sure if you open your hymnal you'll find one that says God is our refuge and strength. Am I wrong or did you get a different hymnal?

We are so close to give it up folks. We're so quick to turn away from all that we know about God and what we believe because there's something in our little tiny center beings – oh no we can do much better. But brothers and sisters we cannot do better. We cannot do better than the free gifts of God. We cannot do better than what God has done for us. We cannot live a better life than that which God has given us to live. We cannot love better than the God who loves us. We cannot share peace better than the God who has given peace to us. There is nothing on this earth that we need that God does not provide and the moment that you fail to remember, that is the moment you are following someone else's priority.

So when you walk out of here today – for the next five seconds when you walk out the door you will remember, hey, guess what, you are one of God's priorities and guess what that priority is for everyone, and guess what, you're going to live by that, and that will work until you get to those doors right out there. And then you're going to start talking about grocery shopping and what you're baking and a million other things.

But I defy and challenge you to do it differently. To be in this world, but not of it. To not let that narthex be actually what it was designed to be – because that narthex was designed to be that place of transition from this world to the other one. But when you come in here you are transformed and so when you walk out there that doesn't stop at the door. You are still transformed, but what happens at that door is you are now the transforming work in the world, by what you do, by what you say, and what you choose. You are the transformation that God has implanted in the world, because it is God's priority and will and desire to save the world.

Amen.

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