

Sermon: “Filthy Lucre”
Rev. Martha Hodges August 16, 2009

Greed is on our minds a lot these days... these days of downsizing and corporate bonuses, of foreclosures and Bernie Madoff. The greed of Enron or AIG executives is easy to condemn, if not quite so easy to understand. It's not such a stretch to revert to the good old-fashioned language of sin and that good old word, avarice, when viewing such excesses, such exploitation, in light of the hardships of the many.

But whether we are patrons of Tiffany's and Gucci or more likely to find ourselves in the aisles of K-Mart, Americans – and I dare say most of those in the industrialized world – are well-acquainted with that desire... that desire for more money, more things, and still more. After all, money does make the world go 'round, for better or worse.

Our economy depends on that desire. From the earliest age, we are taught not just to want particular things – the latest PlayStation or Barbie – but to want... period. To never be satisfied with what we have, satisfied with what we need, satisfied with enough. We learn to be in an eternal state of dissatisfaction – what the Buddhists call dukkha. A perpetual state of unease, of desire. The root of all human suffering, the Buddha tells us.

And what kind of suffering, what thwarted desire, is the acquisition of stuff supposed to assuage? That, to me, is the interesting question. If we can answer that, then maybe we can start to look at how to satisfy those unidentified longings, that desire that is too frightening to call by name. The desire to live forever.

Now, there's more to it than that, I know. We surround ourselves with stuff for lots of reasons.

Fear is one of those reasons. The fear that that rainy day is just around the corner, that we may wake up tomorrow to find ourselves living under a bridge, with all our worldly belongings in a purloined shopping cart. Not an entirely irrational fear. Many of us live paycheck to paycheck, and an unexpected loss, an illness or divorce or job layoff, could land us in that predicament. More likely, though, is that we'd find ourselves postponing retirement, telling our child she will need to finance her own college education, or drastically cutting back on our standard of living. None of those prospects is comforting. Small wonder, then, if we succumb to penny-pinching or, conversely, if we invest in unneeded stuff while we're still able to do it. If we become hoarders of the outworn and useless. “Don't throw that out! It might be worth something,” is a phrase most of us have probably uttered at one time or another.

So fear of an uncertain economic future is one reason we desire to earn more, to own more. We surround ourselves in a protective cocoon of things to keep out the cold reality that poverty is never out of the question, that the wolf is never that far from the door. Understandable... but in the process, we may forget to live in the present, forget to live generously, forget to be grateful.

Those practical fears are not all that motivates us to buy. Money and things are the markers of status in our society. They tell the world that we are, quite literally, worth more. In these days it seems all you have to do to be a celebrity is to be rich. Money brings with it instant glamour and instant fascination. Now, most of us probably don't crave celebrity. But who doesn't desire status? Who doesn't want admiration? Respect? Because, sadly, money does buy those things. In our supposedly egalitarian society, money, inherited or earned, brings with it the assumption that we are somehow more deserving than those without it. We must be exceptionally clever and competent to have accumulated such wealth.

Greed is the path to joining an American form of the elite. And elitism – the ability to say, I can afford to live in this neighborhood and you can't, I can afford to send my child to this college and you can't, I can afford to wear these shoes and you can't – elitism satisfies a human longing to be special. It doesn't matter if the house is more livable or the shoes more comfortable and durable – what matters is how much they cost, and that everyone know how much they cost. We see this in our children who insist on buying certain brands of clothing. We want to be part of the in-group just as much as our children do. We want that status of being among the chosen, the deserving, the elite.

This fallacy, that wealth marks us as special, has roots in the theology of the Puritans and maybe further back than that. In our America, this land of strivers, with its history of a vast frontier just waiting to be claimed by Europeans, worked and used, material success has historically been considered a sign of God's favor. And still today, we hear the Gospel of Prosperity preached in some churches – the message that God wants us to be rich. Conversely, if we are poor, it must be because we are undeserving, because we are not favored by God, because our faith, or our efforts, are weak.

The truth that some of the hardest jobs, the jobs that are dirty, dangerous and demeaning, pay the least, ought to convince us that some people – some classes – are simply out of God's favor, if we had any doubt. After all, if money were allocated merely on the basis of how hard we work, the nursing home aid and the worker in the poultry processing plant would be among the richest people around. To satisfy our sense of justice, it's easier to believe at some unexamined level that these workers are less deserving than the stock broker, the surgeon and the professional athlete.

And we don't have to hear the Gospel of Prosperity in church to still believe it – or believe a version of it. To believe that goodness, however we understand it, is rewarded in this material world with the acquisition of good things – a nice house, a good car, and pretty baubles. We believe that America enjoys the special blessing of God and its people are entitled to wealth limited only by their willingness to work. And if we don't acquire a lot of money and all the things associated with the good life, how are we to know that God loves us, that we are chosen? That we are special?

Why is it so important to us to be special? Well, money and the status it buys come with power. Economic power, the power to buy things, but also the power of

influence and the power of privilege. In our competitive economy, wealth implies superior skills and the defeat of others less skilled. It implies that we have had to step on a few heads on the way up, and we Americans admire winners. Paradoxically, we also admire generosity, and wealth allows us to be generous. If an Andrew Carnegie or Bill Gates gives back huge amounts of money, establishes libraries or funds AIDS treatment in Africa, we are happy to overlook or even turn into a virtue any ruthlessness they may have employed to reach such heights. Even charity becomes an exercise in power. We wouldn't have the power to give if we had not exercised the power to take. The power we exert to become rich and the power that riches buy – It all becomes part of the American awe in which we hold business acumen. Fairness and compassion are values that we claim to admire but they can't hold a candle to know-how and determination in our national pantheon of virtues.

Why are money, status, and power so desirable to us? They help to silence the little voice within us that whispers that we are nothing, that we, too, will ultimately die, that we, too, are tiny specks in the universe, mortal and insignificant.

Money lets us feel that we matter. I suspect that this is as true of Bernie Madoff as it is of any woman stuck in rush hour traffic or any guy shopping at Walmart. We want to matter. We want to matter -- and we suspect that we don't.

If money really did make us feel important and valuable and even immortal, it would be one thing. But all we have to do is look at the lives of the rich and famous to see that they're as tormented by insecurities, loneliness and meaninglessness as the rest of us. Maybe even more so, since the rich have to suspect every friend and hanger-on of being in it only for the money.

Indeed, the new field of happiness economics seeks to measure satisfaction with life and figure out what determines our level of happiness. So far, it looks like, beyond a certain point, having more wealth doesn't make much difference to our happiness. Once our needs for adequate food, shelter and other necessities have been met, our happiness is more likely to depend on how much free time we have, and how much control we have over that time. It turns out that freedom is more important to happiness than money.

There's something called the Easterlin Paradox that demonstrates that our aspirations increase along with our income once our basic needs have been met. In other words, the more we have, the more we want. Money is like heroin in this way. It takes more and more to satisfy our craving, to dull our pain – the pain of fear, loneliness, insignificance, purposelessness.

So if money doesn't really do the trick, what will? Freedom to determine what we do with our time, the happiness economists tell us. I have my doubts about that. People who are unemployed have all the time in the world, but I doubt that they're happier than the employed. Humans need a certain amount of challenge in their lives in order to have a sense of accomplishment, and accomplishment of some kind is key to happiness, I believe. This has been shown to be true for animals, and observation of

human behavior suggests that it is true of us as well. A reasonable challenge and the wherewithal to meet it give us a sense of purpose. Sometimes that challenge may be to become wealthy, and the accumulation of greater wealth may become our purpose in life. It certainly seems likely that once you've earned your first million or two, getting more must become a kind of game in which money just happens to be the reward for winning.

So if it's not really about money, what else besides a certain amount of security, freedom and a sense of accomplishment can make us happy? Ask yourself what you would do with that million dollars Regis Philbin just handed you. Maybe that will tell you what it is you really need.

Would you give it away to friends and family? Maybe what you crave is to be able to demonstrate your love. And you can do that without the filthy lucre.

Would you give it to a good cause? Maybe you want to know that your life is contributing to the sum total of justice in the world. There are other ways to help.

Would you blow it all on a trip around the world? Maybe you crave stimulation, variety, entertainment.

A fancy house? Maybe you want and need a feeling of safety.

A big vacation for you and your friends? You probably need more play time in your life.

Would you invest it in art and real estate? Maybe what you really want is some permanence, some part of you to last beyond death.

Or would you just sit in a vault somewhere playing with your money? Freud would say in that case you've got another kind of problem.

Sometimes you find clues to the answers you seek in unexpected places. I found this story to be poignant and suggestive of some deep answers to this question. It comes from a review of an art installation at New York's Museum of Modern Art:

"The Chinese artist Song Dong keeps a daily diary in water on stone. Why write a life when the words will evaporate?... Growing up during the harsh years of the Cultural Revolution, Song hit on a way to practice calligraphy without squandering paper or ink. "Waste Not," his labyrinthine life-as-art installation... pays homage to a more earthbound frugality. For forty years, the artist's mother stockpiled birdcages and bottle caps, jump ropes and toothpaste tubes, mittens and bowls in her small wooden house in Beijing... When Song's father died unexpectedly in 2002, thrift gave way to hoarding, as if stuff could palliate grief. Song persuaded his mother to help him order the chaos into... this humble monument to deprivation, attachment, evanescence, and loss." (Andrea Scott, *The New Yorker*, Aug 10 & 17, 2009, p.16.)

Deprivation, attachment, evanescence, and loss. At bottom, I think that this is what drives any of us to collect stuff, to collect money and to spend it. We are building a monument to our fears, our hurts and disappointments, and, ultimately, to our lives. It's an absurd and poignant revolt against the knowledge that we are going to die, to cease to be. The knowledge that we will, someday, be forgotten, and all our accomplishments and traumas and insights and loves will vanish with us.

And the only way to deal with that is to be okay with it. To be okay with the knowledge that this life is all we get, that we will rejoin the elements from which we came and once more become part of the earth. To find comfort in the understanding that we are earth's creatures, one among billions, and our moment in time is less than a nanosecond in the grand scheme of eternity. Isn't that enough, to be part of something eternal, even if our bodies and our monuments crumble into the elements? Isn't that enough, to have lived?

Why write a life in words when the words will evaporate? Like the Chinese artist, we are all writing our lives in water on stone. The water evaporates; the stone remains for longer, and then crumbles too. No amount of wealth, no depth of desire, will change that. And that is as it should be. We are not made of the things we buy; our lives are not made of our possessions. For we are creatures of the earth and stars, of water, air and fire. And that is eternity enough.

Let us remember to live gratefully, to love generously, to write our lives with compassion and attention, and when it is over, to be content.