

“The Holy Headstand”

I.

I really don't want to talk about money this morning. And I'm pretty sure you don't want me to talk about money. I've been living in Iowa for a little over two and half years now, and in my time among you I've noticed a couple things. You are an unfailingly polite and gracious people. In your spare time, you like to gather in large groups and walk around while eating—at the State Fair, arts festivals, the Farmer's Market, wherever. And I've noticed something else: you *really* don't like talking about money. Money is personal. Money is private. Money is not something we discuss in public.

And believe me, I'm not complaining. That is one of the reasons I fit in so well around here. I don't want to talk about it either. But apparently Jesus does. Our Scripture reading for this morning serves up a selection from the Sermon on the Mount where Jesus puts money front and center. And when Jesus talks about something, I kind of have to talk about it. I just want you to know that this was not my idea.

If we're going to do this, let's jump right in: How much? How much money would you need to be happy? Not filthy rich, not spending your summers on the French Riviera. Just enough to make you content. To give you a sense of security. How much money would make you happy? I'll give you a moment to think of a number...

Got it? If you're like most people, the number you just came up with was actually a pretty modest sum—on average, about 20% more than you're making right now.¹ Not a ton of money, not some obscene amount. Just *enough*—to buy a little more, to save a little more, to feel a little less anxious about the future.

But here's the thing: *Everybody* thinks they would be happy with 20% more. Including the people who make 20% *less* than you do. They think you're living the sweet life right now. And the people who have attained your happiness threshold—the people making 20% *more* than you do—well, they are not any happier than you are. They think they *would* be happy...if they could just make about 20% more.

It turns out you can never make so much money that you will never worry about money. There is no magic number. And most of us will never feel like we have enough. The goalposts keep moving; contentment continues to remain somewhere just beyond our reach.

More money will not make us happy. More money is not the answer. So...maybe I'm wrong. Maybe this isn't about money after all.

II

The passage opens with some stark words: *No one can serve two masters. You cannot serve God and wealth.* But I have a problem with this translation. Jesus isn't talking about “wealth.” I wish he were. If this is just about wealth, well, I'm off the hook because I don't have any. But this is not just about wealth. Jesus uses an Aramaic word—*mammon*—that means property or possessions or belongings. In my translation, *stuff*.² So this is about all of us. We have all got stuff. And that is not the problem. The problem is that, too often, our stuff has got us.³

We are a people defined by our consumption. What we eat, where we eat, what we wear, where we live, the stuff we buy -these are the things that tell us and tell others who we are. Do you do your Christmas shopping at Southridge, Merle Hay, Valley West or Jordan Creek? Do you get groceries at Hy-Vee, Dahl's or Gateway Market? Should I meet you for lunch at Wendy's or La Mie? Do you get your morning cup of coffee at Starbucks or Dunkin' Dounts? Do you drive a Ford or a Volvo?⁴ Tell me what you buy and I'll tell you who you are.

Mammon defines us. And *mammon* makes us miserable. It drives us to work and worry ourselves to death; to buy and spend and sink into debt, feeding the endless cycle of consumption. It sets our schedules, shapes our habits, bosses us and bullies us into doing its will. It sets our value; it tells us who we are, and who we are not. No one can serve two masters, and *mammon* is the master of us.

But not for long. Not if Jesus gets his way. *Mammon* may be in charge for the moment, but Jesus has a plan to put an end to all of that. A great revolution has begun. And we can get in on the ground floor.

Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? You want to put *mammon* in its place? Want to send a message that *mammon* is not the boss of you? Then stop worrying. Knock it off. Three times in this passage, Jesus tells us not to worry –not about food, not about drink, not about clothes.⁵ Don't be so anxious about all of that *stuff*. Trust your Creator to provide for your needs. Leave the worrying to God.

Of course, this sounds...what's the word?...*insane*. We *have* to worry...don't we? Doesn't worry keep us from complacency, from irresponsibility, from reckless and stupid behavior? Doesn't worry drive us to do more, make more, be more? Isn't worry our friend?

We certainly think so. But Jesus asks a pretty good question in verse 27: *Can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life?* In other words, what has worry ever done for you? It never changes anything. It never makes things better. Worry has never added a single hour to anyone's life...but it has already subtracted years from mine. Worry will not balance your checkbook, mow the lawn or pick up around the house. But it is more than happy to preoccupy us, to take up too much space in our heads, to rob us of our time and our sleep. Worry is a rip-off. We spend so much on it, and it has never done a thing for us.

III

So, what have we learned so far? *Mammon* makes us miserable and worry is a waste of time. We were never meant to live like this. We were born for something better.⁶ Maybe it's time we take a different approach. Maybe we are ready to try something new.

Verse 33: *But strive first for the kingdom of God and [God]'s righteousness, and all these things will be added to you as well.*

This is the part where Jesus tips his hand. He is not interested in offering us a little self-help advice or some sort of financial seminar. He has no intention of helping us cope with our life in this world; he wants to put an end to the world as we know it –the world where *mammon* calls all the shots, where worry is routine, where greed is good.

Of course, this is the only world any of us has ever known. And we have grown kind of comfortable with it. We may have even stopped noticing all the ways it makes us miserable. But Jesus intends to turn it all upside down, to usher in something he calls the kingdom—or the reign—of God.⁷

Jesus talks a lot about the “reign of God.” It’s his passion, his purpose, “the core” and “very essence” of his ministry.⁸ The particulars are a little vague, but maybe this is the best way to describe it: The reign of God is exactly like this world except it is entirely different. It has all the same elements, but everything gets turned upside down. God is in charge instead of *mammon*; the things that used to worry us become surprisingly unimportant; sharing by all means scarcity for none. The reign of God is a whole new ball game.

And why does Jesus tell us about it? Because we don’t have to wait for that world to come in its fullness before we start living as citizens of it. We do not have to confine ourselves to the world as it is; we can start to see the world as it will be, start living as an upside down people, start rehearsing for the world that God has promised.

And that will make us into entirely different people. When we really start to seek and to strive for the reign of God, our worries have a way of withering. Not disappearing, not departing entirely, but shriveling and shrinking somewhat. God’s reign gives us the gift of perspective. We start seeing the difference between the things that truly matter and the things that really don’t; between the things that deserve our concern and the things that only waste our time. *Mammon* loosens its grip on our lives. We end up worrying less, living more, learning the ways of the upside down world.

IV.

But, of course, that will give us some trouble fitting in to the world that we’ve got. Citizens of an upside down world are bound to look a little odd in a world that still sees itself as right side up. Instead of taking our marching orders from *mammon*, we’ll be learning to share our stuff with people who need it more than we do. Instead of allowing our worries to drive us to distraction, we will find the balance that comes from knowing what matters most. When God takes us and turns us upside down, we get a whole new set of priorities. And we can end up awfully weird.

Take it from the guy who wasn’t exactly the homecoming king in high school: Weird people need to stick together. The vision that Jesus lays out in this passage—the dream and the discipline of living now for the world to come—is not something any of us should ever attempt on our own. It takes a supportive, intentional, caring community to live in this way. It takes a church to be the people Jesus knows we can be.

And it takes a church to get the word out to the rest of the world. This is not just about us; lots of people are frantic and flailing, enslaved by *mammon*, oppressed by their fears, hanging on by a thread. We can tell them that in the gracious plan and purpose of God, everything is about to change. Better yet, we can show them that it is already happening—right here, right now, among the peculiar people of Plymouth Church.

In Jesus Christ, the world is being turned upside down. And God wants to turn us right along with it. We are here to learn together the art of the holy headstand.

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Notes

¹ The 20% figure comes from a paper published a few years ago by economist Richard Easterlin, “The Economics of Happiness.” You can read more at Karen Sternheimer’s “Everyday Sociology” blog: <http://nortonbooks.typepad.com/everydaysociology/2007/11/consuming-happi.html>

² In the New Testament, the word *mammon* is only found on the lips of Jesus. And it is always derogatory. See the entry in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*. Volume IV. Edited by Gerhard Kittel. Translated Geoffrey W. Bromiley. (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1967), pp.388-390.

³ Several commentators, including R A Hare, suggest that Matthew leaves *mammon* untranslated in order to personify it –to make it into some sort of semi-personal false god (not unlike “the Almighty Dollar”). *Matthew Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*. (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1993. p.73.

⁴ Actually, in the matter of Fords and Volvos, my family owns one of each. Make of this what you will.

⁵ And all told, there are six occurrences of *merimanaō* in this passage. For a classic analysis of the word and its significance in the New Testament, see Rudolph Bultmann’s entry in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*. Volume IV. Edited by Gerhard Kittel. Translated Geoffrey W. Bromiley. (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1967), pp.589-593.

⁶ John Calvin gets a bad rap for allegedly promoting a low view of the human condition; he can in fact be a champion of human dignity. Commenting on this passage, he writes: “Christ reminds us that there is the greatest inconsistency in [people], who are born to a better life, being wholly employed in earthly objects.” *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists, Volume I*. Translated by the Rev. William Pringle. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1998), p.344.

⁷ The notion that Jesus proclaimed an “upside down kingdom” is a common one; I first encountered it in the writings of sociologist and occasional theologian Donald Kraybill, who was provost of Messiah College when I was a student there. See his book *The Upside Down Kingdom*. Revised Edition. (Scottsdale, PA: Herald press, 1990).

⁸ *Ibid*, p.19.