

Conflicting Visions of the Future

A sermon on 1 Timothy 6: 6-19; Jeremiah 32: 1-3a, 6-15; and Luke 16: 19-31 by Nathan Nettleton, 25 September 2016

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Message

Jesus Christ offers us vision of the future which sharply differs from that offered by modern economics, and we need to intentionally nourish that vision.

Sermon

There were thousands of extraordinary stories in the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks that brought down the twin towers of the World Trade Centre fifteen years ago. Many of the stories were inspiring and heart-warming. Others were depressing, and some were nearly as terrifying as the attacks themselves. One of the more perverse stories was the eagerness to reopen the Wall Street Stock Exchange as quickly as possible.

It became obvious then, if there had ever been any doubt, that the Stock Exchange is one of the great temples of a major world religion. The reopening was spoken of in religious terms as being a tribute to those who had lost their lives, as a much needed sign that the fundamental fabric of American society and culture was not destroyed, and therefore as a cause for celebration and confidence.

Those who do not belong to that particular religious persuasion might describe the Wall Street reopening in quite different terms. They might see the Stock Exchange as merely a place where people driven by greed go about the business of accumulating as much of the world's wealth into their own hands as possible.

They might characterise the eagerness to reopen it as people saying, "Thousands of people were murdered next door. Gee that's too bad. Oh well, let's get back to making more money." They might see it as being more like a callous insult to the dead than a moving tribute.

The people who voice views like that, though, are either failing to recognise the religious nature of economics, or they are devotees of some other religion who are seeking to discredit this religion in favour of their own. I'm one of that second group.

There is nothing new in the idea that a commitment to the accumulation of wealth is a religious commitment that conflicts with Christian faith. It was pretty clearly articulated in the reading we heard from Paul's letter to Timothy. The apostle said, flat out, that there are all kinds of evils that have their roots in the love of money, and that an eagerness for wealth erodes any commitment to Jesus, leading people far from the faith and making them highly susceptible to corruption and compromise.

Timothy is told to shun such paths and to fight the good fight of the faith instead. Perhaps, though, the area that best shows up the religious nature of this conflict is the respective visions of future salvation offered by these two different faith systems.

To those who hold an economic faith, the vision of salvation is a world of unlimited economic growth and the free movement of capital and commodities. This is a vision for which they are willing to advocate enormous sacrifice. It is recognised that there is often enormous pain and hardship as the economy of a nation is deregulated and inefficient

industries are closed or restructured. But such pain and sacrifice is worth it for the achievement of economic heaven, they tell us.

The skeptics might say that those making the sacrifices and those reaping the benefits are seldom the same people. They might also point out that there is something inherently contradictory about championing the free movement of money and commodities while erecting more and more barriers to the free movement of people. For all their pious talk of trickle-down effects and the like, the presence of more and more of the world's poor knocking at the door somehow doesn't have a place in their doctrine.

The language of economics might be different now, but the Apostle Paul recognised that the devotees of wealth had their own vision of salvation. He tells Timothy to instruct any rich Christians to be careful not to "set their hopes" on riches. He suggests that instead, if anyone wants to set themselves up with a solid foundation for the future, they should do it by investing themselves in generous sharing and doing good for others.

Such a statement is obviously coming out of a quite different vision of the future, and of the nature of salvation. The vision Jesus offers is of the unlimited growth of love and of the reconciliation of all things in God.

In this vision, people discover the freedom of simplicity and are able to find real joy and pleasure in the simple things of life, the things that money can't buy. This vision doesn't rule out buying and owning material things, but it does say that they are not the be all and end all, and that our ownership and use of them is subordinate to the things that matter in the culture of God.

In our first reading, we heard of the prophet Jeremiah buying a block of land as a prophetic sign of hope. Jerusalem was about to be overrun by an invading army, and Jeremiah's purchase looked a bit like investing in the deckchairs onboard the Titanic after it hit the iceberg. But Jeremiah made his purchase with his eyes open, and he did it, not as a speculative investment in a post-war property boom, but as a bold witness to a hope in God's promise to bring the people home from exile and re-establish them on their ancestral homelands. Jeremiah was putting his money where his mouth was in his prophetic mission to awaken the people to an alternative vision of the future; a vision in which God's culture of love and hope take root and hold sway over our lives.

In this vision of the unlimited growth of love, there is a dismantling of the borders and boundaries and a lifting up of the poor that they might share equally in the banquet of life. When a wealthy country like ours is investing obscene amounts of money in border protection to keep out the people who were supposed to be making our sports shoes in the sweatshops of South Asia, the story Jesus told in tonight's reading comes horrifyingly close to home. We feast on plenty and try to keep the poor outside the gate, but what we are doing is destroying ourselves.

Don't fall for the common mistake of thinking that this story is Jesus telling us what heaven and hell are and what they look like. Jesus was simply using a popular story, and putting his own spin on it to make a point. It was a bit like all those jokes we have about people arriving at the pearly gates. We don't make the mistake of taking the details of those stories literally,

and neither should we with this one. But Jesus is using the story to tell us things that really matter.

He is warning us that the way we treat one another, and especially those in the most desperate need, is creating habits and corrupting our spirits and entrenching us in patterns we will find increasingly difficult to get out of. Perhaps, like the rich man in the story, by the time our eyes are opened to what we've been doing, we'll have created such an unbridgeable chasm around ourselves that even if we wanted to begin to love, we'd no longer be able to reach anyone or be reached by anyone.

Let me come back to the contrasts Paul drew for a minute. He makes another important point for us. He says that the life to which we have been called – the life without limit – is not gained without struggle. It is not easy to break free from the patterns we have entrenched ourselves in and embrace instead the culture of Jesus. We've got to fight for this new life; to fight the good fight.

And when you begin to look at the clash between Christian faith and economic faith, you can see how right he was. The devotees of wealth have a seemingly unlimited marketing budget. However committed we might be to not following their doctrines, we can't go anywhere or do anything without being exposed to a saturation campaign extolling the joys and virtues of the economic consumer culture. Every imaginable good thing in life can be purchased, so we are told, if only we have the money. And we are told it everywhere we look and listen, almost twenty four hours a day.

If we want to live out a different faith and a contrasting vision of future salvation, without succumbing to that endless message, it is going to require struggle. It is going to require us to take active steps to immerse ourselves in the alternative vision and nourish within and among us a passionate hunger for the culture of the kingdom of God.

That's one of the reasons it is so important for us to gather here each Sunday and to maintain our practices of daily prayer, either physically together when we can, or scattered but united in spirit and prayer. We are creating and ingraining new habits, new visions.

Gathered here around this table, we continue to celebrate this subversive alternative vision and to open ourselves to the Christ who meets us here and shapes within us a new spirit. We listen to the one who rose from the dead and whose stories challenge the heresies that constantly bombard us, and we commit ourselves to the living out of stories of compassion, love, hope and peace rather than stories of greed, arrogance and callous indifference.

If these alternative visions and stories had no more power than those that are told by the devotees of wealth, they'd probably never compete with the bombardment, but these stories pulse with the power that raised Jesus from the dead. So in that hope, we gather here around this table, praying for God's will to be done and God's culture to emerge, and we eat and drink the first fruits of our salvation "until he comes".

There's a tough struggle ahead of us, but Jesus is leading the way, so let's stand and boldly declare our commitment to the faith of the church...