

Making Choices

I am reading a marvelous book called "The Enchantments of Mammon," mammon being the Bible's word for Money.

It's a book that argues that we don't actually live in a secular, rational, scientific world.

Rather, we live in a world stuffed with religion and spirituality: but it's a religion and spirituality that worships not God, but money, and the products we make and buy.

Malls have replaced cathedrals as places of worship.

Our deepest longings are supposed to be filled by what we buy and sell.

The sub-title of the book is: "How Capitalism Became the Modern Religion."

The author argues that we live in a world where human beings are no longer revered as spirit infused bodies, but as tireless consumers.

It's actually quite amazing how this transformation came about, as the early titans of advertising drew on the language of sacrament and faith to explain their newly emerging world.

There is Artemus Ward, who said in 1897 that "our greatest and most successful advertisers are mystics" who induce "soulful vibrations" in consumers.

Then there is Tom Masson, who in 1920, as the managing editor of Life magazine, proclaimed that "advertising is the master spirit of the age," and one must experience the product "the same way one experiences religion."

Finally, Elbert Hubbard proudly announced in 1911 that “we believe in Big Business and the Religion of Business ... [and] when I want to hear really good sermons, we attend a weekly lunch at the ad club.”
McCarragher, *The Enchantments of Mammon*, 235-237.

The only thing that’s changed over the last 100 years is that the ads are more pervasive, and we’ve grown so used to them that we often don’t even notice, let alone question, the world views they create.

But when we do stop long enough to look around, what we see is that our current economic system promotes a way of life that pretends to bring heaven to earth, by turning stuff into objects of worship; exchanging our in-born longing for the divine into a longing for the next new thing.

And truth be told, lots of folks manage to live a lifetime within the grasp of this alternate reality; one that brings instant gratification, but in the end is not nearly enough to satisfy our deepest yearnings.

And it is to those deepest parts of ourselves that Jesus is speaking of today, not with words of sweet nothings, but with words that challenge and unmask, and definitely unnerve!

Unlike the life of ease that the advertisers offer, the life that Jesus invites us into today seems for all the world to be impossible to actually live out.

Cut off your hand?!!

Gouge out your eye?!

Like the Pharisees, many will say “to make demands that cannot be obeyed makes no sense.” J. Cobb.

Never get angry?

Fat chance!

Never check out that beautiful woman walking down the street?

Sure!

No divorce?

What planet are you living on?!

But Jesus is doing something amazing with the rules that most of us agree we have to follow.

Jesus takes the rules and cracks them open.

So while most of us might feel all in with God because we haven't killed anyone today (and look down our noses at the guy in the newspaper who did), Jesus says, keep looking.

Did you get mad at the idiot who cut you off in traffic this morning?

Did you have a dust up with your wife or child during breakfast?

And when I say "why, yes I did," Jesus lays down the coup de grace: if you did, you're in no position to judge the killer in the paper.

Same goes for the guy who left his wife for the young bombshell secretary, which has the whole neighborhood atwitter!

If you're ogling a gal at the beach, or stuck on internet porn, you're in no position to judge the guy who left his wife.

This morning, Jesus holds a mirror to our collective face so we can see our parade of foibles and failures, our self-excused nastiness and egos gone wild.

The point of this isn't to shame us or to put us down.

Perhaps what Jesus wants us to see is that try as we might, we can't **obey** ourselves into salvation.

Our own willpower won't do the trick.

And if that's our situation, then what saves us?

Isn't it grace?

Not my efforts — but God's mercy?

And since every one of us is incapable, on our own, of living out the incredible demands of the law, especially as those demands are deepened and heightened and widened by Jesus, what we have to rely on is not our ability to perform, but our willingness to surrender.

Surrender to the love of the God who delights in making us whole, if only we will exhale long enough to make room for God working in us.

Surrender to the love of the God who delights in filling our hands with good things, if only we will lay down our phones, and let go of our fantasies, long enough to receive these good things.

Last week, Jesus called us salt.

He called us light.

He invites us to look at who we are from a different angle, from a new point of view.

That we, gathered around Jesus, might become, like Jesus, a sign to the world of a different way to live life.

That we might become a people who “search for something deeper and better than our own comfort, who long for something more than the next new toy, to become a people who see that all of life is holy.” B. Younger, paraphrased.

And to grasp the undeniable truth that, to one degree or another, we are all of us broken.

That our brokenness, while it so often leads us to condemn and judge, in fact, once acknowledged, becomes the glue that holds us close together, because recognizing our brokenness is the wellspring of compassion; the source of mercy.

The call of God is not one of judgment, but of mercy.

Today, both Jesus and Moses offer us a choice:

“We set before you blessing or curse, life or death, choose life so that you may live!”

How shall we choose?

Perhaps by admitting that we choose death when we give ourselves “to that which doesn't matter.

When we exchange our longing for the divine for a trip to the mall.

When we rush to meet deadlines that have no meaning or bow before demands that are unworthy.

These embrace death.

How then shall we embrace life?

Perhaps by committing ourselves, each and every morning, to loving God with all of our heart and mind and soul.

Perhaps by giving to the poor whenever we are asked, and working for justice whenever we can.

By caring for the hurting and the weird, the vulnerable and rejected.

By playing with children, and taking time with our elders.

By laughing, out loud, and often.

And by crying too.

By being patient with our imperfections, and the imperfections of our neighbor.

By taking a walk around the block, without a phone or earbuds on.

By reading a poem, or writing one.

Maybe what Jesus is saying to us today is simply this:

'Stop doing what's not worth your time.

Look around — take a deep breath!

Apologize!

Forgive!

Live in the joy that holds all of life together!

Choose life ... and live!" B. Younger, paraphrased.

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