

Sermon: “The Gospel that Provides Prosperity versus the Prosperity Gospel!”
Sunday, May 15, 2011
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Christ Church, Shaker Heights
Easter 4, Year A: Ps. 23; John 10:1-10

Two weeks ago I was at the Maumee Bay Convention Center attending the final workshop for the Calvin Institute Study that Christ Church has participated in this past year. Astoundingly when I arrived I learned that the conference center charges \$7.00 per day for Internet access. Astounding because Internet access is free now a days at most places. As I am a thrifty Dutchman – read cheap here - I decided not to pay the additional fees, which would have totaled \$21.00 for the time I was there.

Waking up on Tuesday morning I made coffee. Java in hand I went to my laptop to read The Plain Dealer and The New York Times. Oops! No Internet. What to do? Well, there was a large plasma flat-screen television in my room, so I found the remote and clicked it on. I am not a big television morning news fan but I can do CNN Headline news and feel reasonably informed.

It was less than forty-eight hours after Osama bin laden had been killed and the talking heads were having a feeding frenzy. Once I had my fill of the news I began channel surfing.

Do you realize just how much Christian programming is on at 7 am on a weekday? Lots! There’s the evangelist Bennie Hinn, who apparently sees the same hair-stylist as Donald Trump. There’s Gordon Robertson, the irascible Pat’s son. And then there’s “The Good Life” with Bob and Jane D’Andrea. Something about the D’Andrea’s captured me and so I stopped surfing. Actually it was something about Bob, since other than sit and smile beatifically at Bob while nodding ascent to his every word, Jane was mute.

What made me linger with the D’Andrea’s was their message; they were Prosperity Gospel believers. For those unfamiliar with the Prosperity Gospel it is the belief of some Christians that God wants to bless them financially. God wants to bless with material stuff: money, homes, cars, furs, jewelry, rich churches, exotic vacations. God is there, ready to give what we want, whatever we desire. The caveat to receiving these “blessings” is that you first have to show God how grateful you are for this abundance waiting for you. You show your gratitude by the fervor of your faith but even more critically, by giving back to God: money that is. And that is what Bob D’Andrea was preaching. He told me that if I would be generous to God, I would soon be getting a boatload of loot from God! All I had to do was send the D’Andrea’s money and the next thing you know I would be as Ginger Rogers sang in the film Gold Diggers, “in the money!”

I was so excited by the Prosperity Gospel message that I went and retrieved my Visa card from my wallet, called the number at the bottom of the screen and made a nice big, fat donation to Bob and Jane. “Easy street here I come,” I thought. “Thanks, be to God!” NOT!

“The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.” Is there a more well-known and beloved passage of scripture than the 23rd psalm? We recited it today. It is indelibly inscribed on the hearts of most Christians. Yet other than loving the elegant language of the King James translation do we comprehend what the psalm is saying?

What does it mean that we shall not want when God is our shepherd? Does it mean what the preachers of the Prosperity Gospel say; that we will have abundant material goods? I imagine that when one of those preachers reads the ending of today’s passage from John where Jesus says, “I came that you might have life, and have it abundantly,” they would say abundant life means having abundant stuff. Put the two passages together and the Prosperity Gospel tells us not wanting means having the “good life” of abundant materialism.

That is an egregious interpretation of scripture. Psalm 23 imagines an abundant life of not being in want, not in terms of material goods, but relationally. It tells us that when we live an abundant life we do so because we live in the presence of God and we are in relationship with God. Whether we are in the greenest pastures or the darkest valleys of life, God is present because God loves us. It is God’s presence we are not wanting of. And in that presence we are safe.

This is what Jesus means when he uses the image of the Good Shepherd. Jesus is always present to us as our companion on the way. Through his loving presence we abundantly receive all that we need. No one else will or can provide this for us, only Jesus the authentic shepherd. Acknowledging that protective, loving presence is to receive the abundant life Jesus promises.

Something else happens in acknowledging this presence of God. It transforms how we relate to material goods. This is especially clear when we read other translations of the 23rd Psalm that substitute the word “lack” for “want.” The New American Bible states, “The Lord is my shepherd, there is nothing I lack.” We lack nothing when we are in relationship with God.

Many of us fail to differentiate between our wants and needs. We believe that wanting something means we need it. “Oh, my gosh, I’ll just die if I don’t have that!” But most of the stuff we want has little bearing on what we need to live. If we have a roof over our head, adequate food to eat, clothes to wear, decent health care, we lack for little. Trust me, life will not end if we don’t have an iPad2 or a new Beemer.

When we equate want with need we ignore that God is our ever-present shepherd who provides for us. To live this way is in contradiction to who we are created to be, and thus we block our own wellbeing.

God created the world so that there is nothing lacking to provide adequately for all of God's creatures: food, water, clean air, materials to build decent housing, the resources to provide education, medicine, health care. All the things that are essential for a decent, productive and happy human life are present in the Creation, provided by God. We lack for nothing. There is only abundance.

But the world is sin-sick and it is made so by our ceaseless, addictive wanting of more and more material goods. This leads us to not live relationally with God or with one another, thereby ignoring the commandment to love God and our neighbor. Not living relationally creates a desperate want in the world. Billions lack much while a tiny fraction of the world's population has almost everything and yet still lusts for more, more, more.

People in Asia, Africa and South America seriously lack the basics of human life because we in the United States and Europe consume so much of the world's resources for our wants. Increasing millions of our own citizens in the U.S. lack the basic human needs for a decent life, while a small minority continues to get more and more and more. This deplorable situation compels us to confront two questions: In a world that has enough, why do so many lack? And for those of us who have more than enough, why are we still so unsatisfied?

This is all going to get much worse. We are at a serious tipping point in our nation. And no one wants to face the stark reality that we need to change the way we engage the problems confronting us. The disingenuous ways that the elected leaders of the Federal and State governments are ignoring our problems, especially how they relate to revenue, budget and deficit issues, is a scenario for disaster that will exacerbate our current morass beyond imagination. Whatever we do, I assure you that based on six thousand years of the Judeo-Christian Biblical experience, slashing programs that provide some modicum of relief to the least among us is not the way out of the dark valley we find ourselves in. It is only by returning to right relationship with God and with one another that we will be led back to green pastures.

To that end I am in full agreement with those Roman Catholic theologians who have been critical of House Speaker John Boehner being the commencement speaker at the Catholic University of America's upcoming graduation. In recent a letter to the Boehner these theologians wrote this. "Mr. Speaker, your voting record is at variance from one of the Church's most ancient moral teachings. From the apostles to the present, the Magisterium of the Church has insisted that those in power are morally obliged to

preference the needs of the poor. Your record in support of legislation to address the desperate needs of the poor is among the worst in Congress.” I say, “Bravo for the faith, courage and moral clarity of these theologians.” We need more of that from the faith community.

How about our voices? It is not just up to theologians and clergy to speak the Gospel truth on this issue. How will our Christian identity be manifested in the world during these dark valley times? Ours is an important voice and we have a valuable contribution to offer.

One way we can do this is through the Greater Cleveland Congregations initiative that will lift our voices powerfully. Through this initiative the faith community will address the chronic lack of basic human needs in our city. I invite you to join me and 2000 other people on Monday, June 6th at 7 pm, as we remind the people of Cleveland and especially the elected leadership that we are all morally obliged to preference the needs of the least among us.

We are called to live our lives according to the model of mutual love envisioned in the 23rd psalm and the Gospel. As God is ever present to us shepherding and providing for our needs, God calls us to do the same for others. As Jesus said, “Just as you have done it to one of the least of these, so you have done it to me.”

That is the only authentic prosperity message of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Everything else is just plain old hogwash.

Amen.