

“Being a Christian in the Age of Empire”

1 Timothy 6.6–19 and Luke 16.19–31

The Rev. Hal Chorpensing, Plymouth Cong’l UCC, 30 September 2007

I know that you’ve listened carefully to every word of both the epistle and the gospel readings from today’s lectionary texts, and I wonder how many of you heard the famous phrase, “Money is the root of all evil”?

That is a sentence most of us think we’ve heard in the Bible, but one that is simply not there. It’s not in the New Revised Standard, the King James, or any other translation I know of. Let me read again what the NRSV records from 1 Timothy: “The **love** of money is a root of **all kinds** of evil.” One contemporary paraphrase of this epistle uses the term “lust for money.”¹

I think this sentence is one that should be tattooed on the forehead (or at least the wallet) of every Christian in the western world. Do you hear the contrast with the so-called “prosperity gospel” that you hear being presented by preachers on cable television? The epistle writer (who scholars don’t think was Paul himself) does not suggest that if we lead righteous lives, we will be rewarded with material wealth.

The message is about the sin of avarice, which can be defined as “an extreme desire for wealth.”² And to my way of thinking, avarice is the most significant sin of American culture. “The love of money” drives the engine of capitalism. “The love of money” widens the gap between the rich and the poor . . . nationally and globally. “The love of money” typically supercedes the love of God’s earth and results in environmental destruction and crises. “The love of money” in our national context often equates petroleum with our national interest. And we know where that leads . . . at least I hope we do.

Even Alan Greenspan, former chairman of the Federal Reserve Bank, “made his diagnosis of our national illness as being that of ‘infectious greed.’”³ What I’m addressing most directly is *not* an individual shortcoming or blind-spot, but a *collective sin* that has wide-reaching implications for the health of ourselves, our families, our nation, and the world – God’s planet that our children will inhabit.

Notice that the text does not say or even suggest that wealth is inherently a bad thing – but rather that the love and pursuit of it can blind us to what is true and important and ultimately real. “But those who want to be rich fall into temptation and are trapped by many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and desire.” The epistle writer goes on to give some instructions to the rich (a category that most of us in this room fall into, using the standard of having a surplus beyond food and clothing): to “do good, to be rich in good works, generous and ready to share, thus storing up for themselves the treasure of a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of the life that really **is** life.”

Avarice fuels the engines of empire, whether we are talking about the Roman, the British, or the American Empire. (Even conservative writers like Dinesh D’Souza are using the term “American Empire.”⁴)

One interpretation of that phrase, “the love of money is the root of all kinds of evil” goes to its Latin translation: “Radix omnium malorum avaritia.” Now, perhaps is just

¹ Eugene H. Peterson, *The Message*. (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2003).

² *American Heritage Dictionary*, 2nd College Edition.

³ Quoted in Phyllis Tickle, *Greed*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), p.18.

⁴ Dinesh D’Souza, “In Praise of an American Empire,” *Christian Science Monitor*, April 26, 2002.

coincidence, but the first letter of those four words form an acrostic: R-O-M-A, *Roma*, the Latin name for Rome. And from this perspective, it is an indictment not only of avarice, but of empire.

When I was in Ireland over the past two weeks, I found that the stamp of British imperialism was still painfully obvious. Our Puritan forbears, under Oliver Cromwell, sacked and burned ancient Celtic holy places in the name of Protestant reformation. And the father of Anglicanism, Henry VIII, dissolved and destroyed every monastery he could get his hands on. And even today, why is the Anglican Church there still called “The Church of Ireland” when the vast majority of Irish are Catholic? Why are there two historic cathedrals in Dublin – St. Patrick’s and Christ Church – both still Anglican? That is a minor vestige of the British Empire, but have you ever thought how odd it is that the British gave up Hong Kong, but they hold onto Belfast? (Makes you wonder, doesn’t it?) Have you ever wondered why the English let roughly a million Irish (who were then British subjects) starve to death in the 1840s? *Empire puts blinders on the best of us.*

So what is empire? Simply put, empire is the condition of one country using its influence or might for its own gain through the control or use of another country. And the driving force of empire is avarice.

Is everything done by an empire bad? By no means! The Romans built great road, aqueducts, and public baths and sanitation in places like Judea. They brought political stability, but they did so under the heel of Roman legions. Did the United States occupation of Japan after World War II and the imposition of a “no-war” constitution help Japan to create a dynamic economy? Of course.

The ideas about Christians and empire are really nothing new. C.H. Dodd, a Welsh Congregational minister and New Testament scholar at Cambridge, wrote these words in 1940: “The gospel is firmly rooted in a story of that which once happened. The story is familiar. But we should observe that the situation into which Jesus Christ came was genuinely typical (the outcome of much previous history) and too long to tell here. The forces with which he came into contact were... permanent factors in history:—government, institutional religion, nationalism, and social unrest.”⁵ Those forces are part of our place in history today.

When you hear the word, “empire,” you could also substitute the term “domination system,” as New Testament scholar Walter Wink does. Or you could use the term “the normalcy of civilization” like Dom Crossan. Or you could employ the term Paul uses: “thrones or dominions or rulers or powers.”⁶



So, if we as Christians don’t follow the path of empire, where should our allegiance be? Is there any alternative to empire? How are we, as followers of Christ, meant to live in an age of empire?

I want to turn to the story of Lazarus and the Rich Man. (Notice, by the way, that Luke never gives the Rich Man a name, which says something from the start.) I would urge you to hear this story as a parable...listen to it as a metaphor for empire.

Let me remind you how this tale begins: “There was a rich man who dressed in purple [the color of royalty] and who feasted sumptuously every day. And at his gate [think of our border fence with Mexico] lay a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, who

⁵ Quoted in the frontispiece of John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus*. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972).

⁶ Colossians 1.16

longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man's table; even the dogs would come and lick his sores."

I would imagine that often this story was used by the institutional church to illustrate an attitude of "waiting for your reward in heaven" and perhaps prodding the rich to do the right thing before landing in hell. But, I should remind you that the concepts of heaven and hell are conspicuously poorly developed in scripture. "Being carried away by the angels to be with Abraham" doesn't sound like heaven to me. (That would be living in Glendalough and perhaps having a lakeful of Guinness... St. Brigid actually used the image of feasting around a lakeful of beer and inviting God, and Christ, and the saints.⁷)

Ralph Waldo Emerson, who was ordained as a Congregational minister before the Unitarian controversy, once wrote that "There are always two parties: the establishment and the movement." In my view, Christianity works best when it is the movement. That was true in the days of Jesus and Paul, and it is true in our own time as well. *Empire is not the movement.*

The rise of the American Empire is not something heralded by the election of George Bush. It is not about Republicans or Democrats. It has been happening since the 19th century, certainly since the days of gunboat diplomacy and the Spanish-American War, perhaps even going back to the Monroe Doctrine of 1823. But with the fall of the Soviet Empire, we are the sole superpower. And unlike Rome, which never had the power to destroy the world, that power lies in our hands.

What are the alternatives to empire? In the following chapter of Luke's gospel, Jesus says, "The kingdom of God is among you."⁸

One afternoon, Sharon and I were talking about the concept of the kingdom of God, which is central to my theology and not so much so to Sharon's. One point of difficulty is the word, "kingdom." The term *basileia* in Greek not only meant kingdom, but also was used to describe the Roman Empire, so to talk about "the kingdom of God" is to set it over and against the Roman Empire and to deny its authority. There is a profound edginess in the Greek term *basileia* that isn't reflected in kingdom. In our discussion, we came up with an alternative translation that I think captures the edginess: "the regime change of God." (If you want to understand how subversive the gospel message is, try saying the Lord's Prayer with that one: "Thy regime change come! Thy will be done here on earth, just the way it is in heaven.")



So, how are we meant to live as Christians in an age of empire? To say subversive things like Jesus said can get you killed. And let's not forget that Jesus was executed at the hands of empire.

To proclaim the regime change of God is to deny the empire and to suggest that the political manifesto of Christians ought to look something like the Sermon on the Mount... or to be even more radical, Luke's account: the Sermon on the Plain, which begins with these words: "Blessed are you poor, for yours is the regime change of God."

To work for the regime change of God means to care about the things and people that Jesus cared about. It is a profoundly countercultural agenda that we Christians have before us. *And we can be co-creators*, because the regime change of God is at hand.

Amen.

⁷ You can listen to a lovely reading of this prayer by Nóirín Ní Riain at http://www.beliefnet.com/audio/religion/catholic/celtic_music/lakebeer.ram

⁸ Luke 17.21