

**“Counterintuitive Investing”**

**Colossians 3.1–11 & Luke 12.13–21**

**The Rev. Hal Chorpensing, Plymouth Cong’l UCC, 5 August 2007**

I’d like to open this sermon by quoting the title of a 1938 Frank Capra film, starring Jimmy Stewart: *You Can’t Take It with You*. And this parable of Jesus, usually called “The Parable of the Rich Fool,” speaks to us today perhaps even more than it did the first-century Jews who heard it. We spend the majority of our adult lives – most of us at least to 65 or 67 – collecting money for retirement, and for some of us, it becomes our dominant concern.

With all the financial upheaval in the life of our family this year, I’ve spent some time with an investment advisor recently, and he is concerned that I won’t retire in comfort unless I really start socking it away...even with the good performance (and the stringent social responsibility stance) of the UCC Pension Fund. Then again, he’d like to me save more than half of the cost of Phase One of Plymouth’s building and renovation project.

With the aging of the baby boomers, investing and saving for retirement is big business. And there are some large social implications: as the baby boomers die, they will affect the largest transfer of capital from one generation to the next in the history of the world. (Planned Giving Committee, please take note!) Maybe you can’t take it with you, but with the dramatic shift in inheritance taxation, you surly can give it to your kids.

I wonder, sociologically, about the impact this transfer of capital will have on the generation who inherits the wealth. (Remember that Smith-Barney ad in the ’90s with John Houseman: “At Smith Barney, we make money the old-fashioned way: We *earn* it!”) As inheritors of the Protestant work ethic, we might have a few concerns about the sense of entitlement of a new generation of heirs. People born in the 60s and 70s don’t have a reputation as being extraordinarily generous when it comes to philanthropy – of course there are exceptions. Generally speaking, though, people my age spend money on themselves ensuring that we have the charming house, the right electronic gear, the right vacations, the right mountain bike, and so on. In Boulder, there is a rising group of folks born in the 60s and 70s who live on inherited money so that they can live a bourgeois bohemian lifestyle, and sometimes they are referred to as “trustafarians.”

Part of the issue is that we haven’t always had good examples to follow and part of it is that there is so much good “stuff” to buy! Have you ever seen the bumper sticker, “Whoever dies with the most toys wins!”?

This is a real departure from the pre-World War II national ethos. Andrew Carnegie – the immigrant son of a Scottish hand-weaver – famously said, “to die rich is to die disgraced.” How many of you have been to the Riverside Church in New York City? It’s the closest thing we have to a cathedral in the UCC. As you worship there, remember that it is a part of the legacy of John D. Rockefeller. Now, these captains of industry 100 years ago aren’t universally paragons of virtue, but many still had a sense of nobles oblige.

And I know that to a certain degree, I am preaching to the choir here. Look around you – at the new construction, not the chaotic mess – **you** have made this a reality! This building rising around you is a remarkable, tangible demonstration of your generosity, not only through your pledges to the church, but to your capital campaign commitments, as well.

*Ours is not a low-commitment faith.* It is not a faith that encourages you to store up your grain in barns or your wealth in the stock market, where the insects and whims of the market can destroy it.

Jesus did not endorse a specific economic system in his lifetime and to suggest that he would be a capitalist, a socialist, or a communist is idle speculation. We do know the major economic force that he and other Jews confronted was the economics of empire, where absolute wealth was concentrated in the hands of very few and the vast majority of people were left to fend for themselves on whatever was leftover. (This may sound familiar.)

Gandhi, though not a Christian, was perhaps the greatest follower of the philosophy of Jesus among any leader in the modern world. Gandhi listed “seven social sins,” and among them is wealth without work – in other words, through investment. Perhaps it is because I am so much a part of the system, but I find that challenging. Wealth without work means no interest on your CDs, no capital gains on your house, no appreciated assets in your 402(k). (But then again, if we took Leviticus literally, nobody could charge interest on a loan, so it might not be so horrible.) We’ve also seen that *state* socialism doesn’t do such a great job as an economic system, and it’s usually accompanied by social repression or totalitarianism. (*Democratic* socialism is another story.)

So, what can we say about Jesus and economics? (He certainly didn’t invent the gospel of conspicuous consumption that we hear from some preachers today!) First, we can assert that he was in a continuous stream of Jewish social prophets who were the exponents of economic justice – often heard as defending their society’s most vulnerable: widows, orphans, and aliens. And in scores of instances in the gospels, we also see that Jesus encouraged generosity as a religious value, especially among those who had the means to help balance social inequalities.

Bringing it down to a personal level, I’d invite you to wrestle with that a bit, so here is some homework. First, consider how you and your family (kids, too!) live out the religious value of generosity. Where do you give and how much of your income? And next, consider how you encourage economic justice...in the ways you invest, in the places you shop, in the things you purchase.



The epistle is today’s lectionary reading is connected to “The Parable of the Rich Fool” for a reason. And as a way of introducing this passage from Paul’s letter to the church in Colossae, I want to share a very old Celtic prayer with you. It comes from a 19th century collection gathered in the highlands and islands of Scotland by a British revenue agent (read: tax collector) named Alistair Carmichael. He compiled an oral history of prayers and chants from the old people who had lived through the land clearances of the highlands and maintained some of the indigenous Christianity of an earlier age:

“Grant to me, O Trinity of grace,  
 From whom all life freely flows,  
 That no tie over-strict,  
     no tie over-dear  
 May be between myself  
     and this world.  
 As it was,  
 As it is,  
 As it shall be evermore,

With the ebb,  
 With the flow,  
 O Trinity of grace.  
 Amen.”<sup>1</sup>

That prayer has such a beautiful way of asking for God’s aid in helping us to avoid attachments that hinder our journeys: “that no tie over-strict, no tie over-dear, may be between myself and this world.” It isn’t world-denying, but rather it seeks to help us release attachment.

Paul’s letter provides a litany of attachments that still seem to dog us 2,000 years later. I do want to say a word about the word “fornication,” which is the word used in the King James Version, and which persists in the New Revised Standard Version. The Greek word is *porneia* (where we get the word “pornography”). *Porneia* means sexual immorality. The word “fornication” means “sexual relations between two unmarried partners.” Now, you may or may not define “sexual immorality” in that way.

Our sexuality is a gift from God, and it is meant to enhance our love for one another. If we categorize *porneia* so narrowly, what do we do with rape, pedophilia, prostitution, and other ways that sexuality is used to diminish, rather than to enhance, the wholeness of life that God calls us to?

What Paul is talking about is letting things that can be inherently good and beautiful get out of balance. And in daily dying and rising with Christ – in approaching each day as a new beginning – we ought to get our priorities right. We shouldn’t let our lives become attached to and guided by our obsessions. The crowning example that Paul leaves us with is greed, which he identifies as a form of idolatry. And that is where it ties back to “The Parable of the Rich Fool,” who builds a temple to his own wealth.

Though we can interpret Paul (who was born and lived in the Greek world) as denying matter in favor of spirit and soul over and against the body – which is a Greek ideal espoused by Plato – it isn’t a part of Jesus’ Jewish message.

It isn’t that sex is bad – sex is a sacred gift from God meant to be handled with life-affirming reverence. It isn’t that material wealth is bad – wealth is a tool we can use to make God’s world a better place for others (and ourselves in the process). It isn’t that anger is bad – but if you become obsessed with it, it will consume your life.

True freedom consists in *releasing attachments* to wealth, sex, and anger. Listen to these two parallel sayings, and see if you can guess who said them:

“For out of the heart come evil intentions, murder, adultery, *porneia*, theft, false witness, slander. These are what defile a person, but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile.”<sup>2</sup> If you guessed Jesus, you are correct. Hear the second saying:

“One does not become pure by washing, as do the multitude of mortals in this world; rather it is they who cast away every sin, great and small.”<sup>3</sup> Any guesses? That was the Buddha.

Though the strain of asceticism is present in virtually all religions, including Christianity, I maintain that Christians are not called to forsake all that is pleasing. Rather, we are called to be its master and not the reverse.

So, what will your legacy be? Will you leave barns filled with grain or will make a difference in the world?

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<sup>1</sup> quoted in J. Philip Newell, *Celtic Prayers from Iona*. (NY: Paulist Press, 1997), p. 69.

<sup>2</sup> Matthew 15.19–20

<sup>3</sup> in Marcus Borg, *Jesus and Buddha: The Parallel Sayings*. (NY: Ulysses Press, 1997), p. 63.

And as you approach each day as a new beginning, what will your legacy of this day be? Will you leave behind attachments or will you allow your attachments to become your master?

In closing, let me share with you a very short poem by the English mystic, William Blake:

He who binds himself to a joy  
Does the wingéd life destroy.  
But he who kisses the joy as it flies  
Lives in eternity's sun rise.

May it be so. Amen.