

When Dreams Become Nightmares

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St. Andrew's Episcopal Church

Last week in the mail I received a perfect “trifecta” of junk mail: First, there were not one but two credit card offers promising perks of miles or cash back. Second, there were three catalogs offering to sell me things that I could buy using those credit cards. Third, there was an offer from my mortgage lender offering me a home equity line of credit, with which I could, the letter suggested, pay off any credit card balances.

So with this little stack of mail I could spend money I do not have, on stuff that I did not realize I even wanted until the mail lady came, and “pay it off” with the single largest source of savings for most American families. It's brilliant, in a way.

There was, tucked in this stack of mail, another letter. One from St. Andrew's. It was inviting me and my family to a sermon series that I'm preaching, along with Fr. Mike, entitled *Enough: Discovering Joy Through Simplicity and Generosity*. I figured I better show up for this. And this sermon series really is about joy, the joy that is our promise as followers of Jesus Christ, the joy that comes from having our relationship with God being the underlying motive for what we want and do in this life.

But first we have to talk about happiness, specifically the sort promised us by the world. When it comes to happiness, I don't know what you as an individual dream of; but I know that the content of our junk mail tells us what our culture thinks we dream of, or at least should dream of. The same is actually true of our junk email too; though perhaps those dreams are somewhat more explicit. I got this great email, a non-explicit one, last week promising to deposit \$250 in my bank account. It began, “Dear Andrew, This is the last email we probably gonna send you.” Oh how I wish they had meant that.

I'm pretty sure the American Dream was supposed to be about something more than this. Something about the promise that society would zealously guard rights and liberties so that an individual, provided he or she would pour in enough hard work, could make a better life for themselves. Something about ours being a land of opportunity. This wasn't supposed to be the sort of opportunity that “won't last long” or that was “for a limited time only.”

By now you've probably noticed we're having an election — and though the stock market is at all time highs, inflation remains low, and even household income rose substantially last year — you'd think from the rhetoric about the state of this country that the sky was falling. It's not. But for many at least, the Dream is dying. In its place is some sort of nightmare.

There are lots of ways to talk about, analyze, and dissect what has happened. But because not all of American society or the worldwide economy is within our individual control, what I want us to think about this morning is what we do have control over, and that is our relationship with our stuff (including money) on the one hand, and our relationship with God on the other.

Before we go too much farther, let us all agree that the only person we're going to judge — positively or negatively — in all this is our own individual self. It's the easiest thing in the world to get convicted about someone else's pocketbook. We've all got our own to worry about. Only you can know whether what Jesus or Saint Paul says is true of the human soul applies to your human soul.

Ok...off of that soapbox, and back to the American Dream turned nightmare. There are two financial diseases that I want to name, not because I'm Dave Ramsey or something, but because these are diseases that infect the human heart, and things that infect the heart are religious problems. These are the same human hearts described by St. Paul in our readings today when he wrote the love of money is the root of all kinds of evil, but the diseases themselves are of a particular American, or at least Western, strain.

The first has been termed Affluenza. But I don't like this term, because we live in the wake of the suburban metroplex "Affluenza Teen," who avoided punishment for killing four people while driving drunk at the age of 16 on the basis that he was so affluent that he was unable to determine right from wrong. He was, the argument in court went, too drunk to drive because he was morally drunk on wealth. This is nonsense.

The problem isn't that wealth makes us morally drunk, it's that it doesn't satisfy our hearts. Houses today are 50% larger than they were 40 years ago. Their inhabitants are no happier.

Even though the houses are larger, we now own too much stuff to fit in them. Self-storage is a \$32.7 billion industry. The self-storage place next to the McKinney campus, where our sound equipment and perishable items for this campus are stored each week, named themselves after the problem: it's Out of Space Self-Storage.

The accumulation of wealth doesn't do what it promises. It doesn't satisfy the heart. We keep accumulating more of it and we keep discovering the same unsatisfying thing.

Can we just acknowledge that is the exact opposite of the way Jesus acts? Jesus does what he promises. He promises to satisfy the hungry heart. Only the devil promises and then fails to deliver.

What this disease does to the American dream is turn it from something whose goal is a noble idea, to something whose object is stuff. And stuff is never a suitable object of desire for our hearts. It hasn't been since the Eve desired the apple in the Garden of Eden.

The second financial disease infecting the human heart is often caused by the first disease, just like the flu can lead to pneumonia. We're going to call "Credit-itis" – and since it ends in "itis" you know it can't be good.

Now look, I'm too young to have been an adult in a world where cash was the normative currency for everyday transactions. I have had a single \$10 bill in my wallet in the last six weeks, and it was only there for a period of about 18 hours. The only other cash I even touched in September was a few quarters found when looking for the remote in the couch cushions.

I'll put it this way: at our house, Amazon delivers toilet paper. Our using the restroom depends on the ease and power of using credit cards to pay for purchases.

But credit cards aren't just a method of payment, there a means of credit. Hence the name. And here be dragons; dragons I've been burned by in my own life. It's much easier to get credit than it should be; and, second, it separates the getting of a good from the taking of your money. It a promise to have what you want now, and pay for it later.

Can we just acknowledge that is the exact opposite of the way Jesus talks about the kingdom of heaven? In the economy of salvation it's pay first, then the heavenly banquet. Cross, then kingdom. Only the devil promises the kingdom first.

There's no better example of what Jesus calls in verse 14 of our gospel reading today "being choked by the cares and riches and pleasures of this life" than being in debt. Here, I don't even think we need to think about high interest credit card debt – I think it's visible in the much less morally ambiguous world of student loans. This is just conjecture, but I don't think it's entirely unrelated that the millennial generation has both the highest student loan debt ever – just enormous, crushing loans – and the lowest involvement in religion. I know so many people for whom student loans are just so overwhelming that their lives are choked by it.

Once you're in debt, the fruits of your labor legally belong to someone else. The Biblical word for that is slavery. In the old mining and factory towns, where the company store was used to keep everyone in a state of perpetual debt to their employer, debt was quite directly used as the means to effectively enslave employees. Today the process is more indirect. I think the devil appreciates the lack of transparency. Because if the devil can get us enslaved to something else, anything else (yes, the Visa bill will do just fine), then he can get us out of being servants of Christ. And that's all he's really interested in anyway.

Our reading from Paul's 1st Letter to Timothy this morning was pretty clear on the spiritual nature of all this. Verse 9: "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 destruction" (1 Tim 6:9) It continues in a verse or two, "But as for you...shun all this, fight the good fight of the faith, and take hold of eternal life" (1 Tim 6:11a, 12a).

What's going on is that our basic nature, our hearts and desires, are corrupted by sin, and so instead of desiring God first, we desire stuff and wealth first. Because sin has a hold of our hearts, instead of wanting to use our resources to help others, we want to hoard them for ourselves. Because sin is in us, instead of finding joy in the life we have, we find discontentment trying to seek the life we wish we had.

It's easy enough to say all that, but the truth of how deeply our relationship to stuff is a critical spiritual problem for us was recently brought home to me in a new way. I stumbled across the audiobook version of a book by Marie Kondo, entitled, *The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying Up*. Real quickly, you learn that by "Tidying Up" she mostly means getting rid of the sh* that fills your house. You can tell from the title the degree to which Ms. Kondo thinks this matters.

At first it struck me as strange the way that she invested objects — the stuff she wanted us to tidy — with a spiritual power over our lives. For example, she explains how you need to say thank you so you can let go of an item you were struggling to part with: "Thank you sweater." She also explained how unread books look at you from the shelf to make you feel guilty.

When it comes to socks...well here, I'll show you. I don't know what you do, but my socks live like this [hold up two socks wrapped in one another]. Ms. Kondo is convinced this is mean. Not, I didn't say "it's bad for the elastic in the socks," which is probably true. Ms. Kondo believes it is mean to the socks. That the first thing we should do is unwrap them and apologize. And then fold them like this. So that they have enough space to be breathe. And because wrapping them in one another is, for Ms. Kondo, a moral wrong.

At first — and ok, still a little bit — I think this is nuts. Investing physical items with personal qualities is the stuff of paganism. But I do appreciate what a thorough, honest paganism it is. Undoubtedly stuff is taking up a spiritual place in our hearts. She's just transparent about acting like it.

I'm not saying that being nice to your socks is the highest moral calling for a Christian. What I am saying is that a lady that talks to socks boldly claims what many Christians fail to even acknowledge, that stuff has spiritual power in our lives. It takes up a place that was made for God.

Our relationship to the material world and to wealth is a spiritual problem. Being honest about that, even if that honesty means we start talking to socks, is the first step towards asking God to help change our hearts so that they desire something new.

To use the language of the parable, the anxieties, fears, and burden we have around stuff and wealth are thorny. Plants being choked by thorns can't uproot the thorns on their own; they need the farmer's help. Same with us; with God's help and with the desire to put him first in our lives, we can all live in such a way that the material world is a place where we exercise joy, generosity, and faithfulness. Amen.