**Sermon 10-21-18**

**Paul Purdue preaching**

**Jesus, Money, and Hope - October 21, 2018**

I grew up in a different theological zip code than many of you. My childhood church served up occasional samples of hell’s fire and heavy fear, along with a good dose of guilt. For example, we never canceled Wednesday children’s choir on Halloween. Mom let me skip it! Around this time of year, we hosted alternate fall festivals, carefully never saying “Halloween” as a kind of silent protest. I trick-or-treated well into high school, but occasionally a youth director led a talk about the evils of Halloween. While dating Connie, I shared my issues with Halloween. Connie laughed: “How can you be against Halloween? It may be the most Christ-like holiday! When else, as a kid, can you put on a costume and ring the doorbell of a neighbor you don’t know and expect to get candy? Trick-or-Treat is about sharing, loving your neighbors!” She, like John Wesley, is less of a systematic theology leaning more towards the practicalities of faith. Looking back, I see that my childhood faith was against a lot of stuff. We were against it. We gently absorbed subtle fear more than glorious hope.

I was afraid a lot as a child. One night, I woke up hearing something go thump in the night. I looked around my dimly lit room, the pinkish orange sodium vapor of the streetlight provided just enough glow for me to see what had to be a huge black snake coiled about five feet from my bed. Feeling too old to call for my parents, I laid awake in bed, struggling to be an adult and trying to convince myself that snake was nothing. The more I stared at the black tangled mass, the more sure I grew of its evil intent. I needed a rod or staff to comfort me, maybe a BB gun.  And there by my headboard, the Lord had provided a tennis racket, through the prevenient grace afforded by my not cleaning my room. Grabbing the tennis racket, I sprung from the bed, and attacked the coiled beast, delivering blow after blow until my dad flipped on the lights and declared, ”What are earth are you doing? It’s 3am!” I looked down to discover I had beaten the stew-beans out of my black and yellow Lexington Tigers (high knee AAU basketball) tube socks! Dad rolled his eyes and I hopped back in the bed feeling good about facing down a possible serpent.

Although, 1 John 4:18 proclaims, “There is no fear in love- perfect love casts out all fear.” I was often afraid.  However, with all the things that my church intentionally, or accidentally, taught me to fear, they never preached about a fear we might ought to have. So many of us live with a silent, stealthy, clever, rarely mentioned, and always unseen monster hiding within our phones, built into our social media apps, embedded in our politics, infecting our conversations, and influencing our decision. This soul-sucking spector tempts us to bow down to things less than God.

Jesus flatly says, “You can’t serve God and money.” (Matthew 6:24) “The glossy appeal of wealth chokes out the Word of God, bearing no fruit.” (MT 13) “Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; your life does not consist in the abundance of your possessions.” (Luke 12:14)

Greed will steal your soul. Consumption will consume you. Money will take your life. Greed keeps us discontent, never letting us enjoy what we have; for consumerism always craves more. “Be on your guard against all kinds of greed for your life does not consist of the abundance of your possessions.” Maybe this verse should be our homepage, stencilled in lovely script on the wall above our large screen TV, embossed on our purses, or engraved on our leather wallets?

Jesus flatly says, “You can’t serve God and money”, and yet over and over and over again we bow down to a false consumer-goods god. We believe that our lives do consist of the abundance of our possessions. The worst peddlers of this lie are many prosperity gospel preachers. Like pornoghaphers, they twist the Word of God to fill their coffers.It is easy to be consumed by our consumer goods- trusting and trading in money more than God, or community, or neighbor, or faith, or hope, or love.

The devil tempted Jesus to seek comfortable robes, a comfortable throne, a big palace, and lots of hired help. Old Scratch showed Jesus the mega palaces of “all the kingdoms of the world”.

We so easily trade in stuff. We ask”‘what do you do for a living?” instead of “how do you live?” We judge worth by something’s market or resale value. If we take that old vase our aunt gave us to Antiques Roadshow and discover it’s worth $123,000, we no longer see it as a loving reminder of familial love, but an asset to carefully manage. We feel we must sell the gifts or worry about it every time we dust or unlock the back door! Our president makes foreign policy fearing the billion dollar purchasing power of a kingdom more than freedom of the press, representative democracy, or the sanctity of human life. We often trust money more than morality. We place our hopes in our finances more than our faith. The ideas of corporate profits and costs infect most of our decisions. When we speak of “the bottom line”, we reveal that money figures into our decisions more than people, goodness, righteousness, ethics, or the public good. If “the market (god)” drives our decisions more than ethics or human dignity, we worship and serve market gods. Be careful; you can’t serve God and money. You can’t serve money and serve your neighbor as yourself.

It’s interesting the things that Jesus doesn’t say. Jesus doesn’t say you cannot serve. Jesus never says you cannot serve “God and country” or “God and family”. Jesus never says “you can’t serve God and your vocation or your labor.”  Indeed, if someone said “you cannot serve God and your neighbors” that would violate Jesus’ greatest commandment! Indeed, you must love your neighbor as yourself. So when you wish you had the best house on the block, be on guard against all kind of greed. Be on guard; fear, or at least have a healthy respect for the evil power of greed or consumerism. Your life does not consist of the things you consume.

Now this is not to say that money is bad. John Wesley taught us that in the hands of the righteous money “is an excellent gift of God, answering the noblest ends. In the hands of God’s children, it is food for the hungry, drink for the thirsty, clothing for the ragged. It gives the stranger a place to lay their head. By money we may supply the place of a spouse to the widow, and a provider to the orphaned. We may be a defense for the oppressed, a means of health to the sick, of ease to them that are in pain; it may be as eyes to the blind, as feet to the lame; yea, a lifter up from the gates of death!” Wesley taught: earn all you can (be honest and just labor), save all you can (not letting pride or epicurean delights drive your purchasing), and above all, give all you can (as did Jesus who gave his life).  John Wesley’s sermon The Use of Money.

In Matthew 6, Jesus said, “Life is more than good meals. The body is more valuable than designer clothing. Consider the cardinals and jays: they do not plant crops or harvest, they don’t build barns, and yet God feeds them. Of how much more value are you than birds! Does obsessing and worrying add even one hour to the length of your life? If then you lack the power to add a single breath to your life, why do you worry about clothes, couches, cars, or houses? Oh, beloved seek first the Kingdom of God (who gives you life, love and breath) and everything else will be alright.” Jesus is not giving planting advice taken from the birds. Jesus does not tell us to abandon the plow or to move to a hunter-gathering, off the grid, lifestyle. Jesus does tell us to quit work. Jesus called fisherman, IRS agents, accountants, doctors…. Jesus worked as a tradesman. The New Testament talks about not being idle, because some Christians, believing Jesus would come back soon, stopped working! Jesus simply tells us not to invest our hopes and dreams in possessions, but to trust in the Creator of all things.

Where is our hope? Faith in Christ casts our living, our consumption, and our giving in new light. Our hopes reside beyond our things. We do live in fear of losing our stuff, for our deepest hopes are not found in things but in God’s Kingdom. We do not live to consume, but to give. We watch out, remembering our capacity for greed.

Someone who had more than they needed came to Jesus and asked, “Teacher, what must I do to have eternal life to fill this longing within me, for I have kept the rules, but somehow I still lack a deeper something.” Jesus said, “If you wish to taste perfection, go, and sell your stuff, and give the money to the poor, and you will find treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.”

Jesus told a story about trading our faith stuff with a deeper hope saying, “the kingdom of heaven is like a treasure buried, hidden and lost in a field. Some stranger found the buried treasure while plowing someone else’s field. They went home and joyfully sold everything else they owned. They then sunk everything into purchasing that field, trading their stuff for an eternal kingdom.”

Oh, let us be on guard, not in fear, but taking care that our living does not consist in striving after stuff. Let us place our hopes in the Kingdom of God: loving our neighbors as ourselves, treating neighbors as kin, welcoming strangers as neighbors, feeding the hungry like family, offering the sick with the healthcare we give our partners, clothing the poor with the labels fit for our children, doing commerce as if we are the client, remembering prisoners as if our own relatives were in jail, and listening to opponents with a loving-kindness that seeks pathways to a just peace. Let us measure our lives by the content of our character more than the cars we drive, our phones, our schools, our vacations, or the prestige of our address.  Let us love mercy, do justice, walk humbly, and be on guard against all kinds of greed. Let us be people who invest our lives in building God’s embracing kingdom, for only what we build for others with the bricks of faith, the mortice of hope, and labor given in love, will endure forever. Amen.