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Georgetown Presbyterian Church, Washington, DC
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Text: St. Mark 10:17-31

Worldliness

One week hence is Stewardship Sunday. This Sunday, the one before Stewardship Sunday, is therefore a day that bids us think about what our commitment to our God and his church is and what it will be. It bids us think about how we *ought* to support the mission God has set for us and how we *can* support it. So, it is apparently by God's providence that the lectionary has therefore decreed that this morning's lessons include one of the two great lessons for thinking about stewardship. The first and most direct of these lessons, and the one we did not read, is the story in the *Book of Acts* of Ananias and Sapphira, a husband and wife who joined the earliest church in Jerusalem in the weeks following Jesus' death and resurrection. As the story goes, it was the habit of those who joined the earliest church to sell all that they had and to pool their resources. That is material enough for stewardship, but this story goes even farther. When confronted with this practice Ananias and Sapphira, however, only told the church that they had sold everything. In fact, they kept a portion back for themselves. When Ananias then came and laid his offering before Peter, Peter who knew perfectly well what was going on, pointed out the shortcoming, and noted that Ananias had lied not to the apostles, but to God. *Acts* then reports this outcome: "Now when Ananias heard these words, he fell down and died." Three hours later, his wife not knowing what happened, came in and repeated the same false tale to Peter. When he pointed the lie out to her, it is said that "immediately she fell down at his feet and died." So, you can see how this is a potent text for Stewardship Sunday. It is, however, a bit heavy handed and one that we normally prefer to use only when pledges are slow to come in or will not cover the

budget.

The other text is this morning's Gospel lesson. A rich young man comes to Jesus and asks Jesus what he must do to inherit eternal life. When he points out that he has kept all the commandments, Jesus tells him, while looking at him with love, that he lacks one thing: "Go," he says, "and sell what you own and give it to the poor." It is not quite as dramatic as the *Acts* passage, but the point is clear nonetheless; elegant and not at all under- or overstated.

Now, I do want to say something about stewardship this morning, and our Gospel lesson requires that I do, for it really is about our relations to God and to our possessions. Nevertheless, I do not want to be quite so obvious and direct at the outset. Rather, I want to say something about what the young man's difficulty is with what Jesus tells him. I want to name his difficulty, because he has given into a temptation that haunts most of us, too, on a daily, and even hourly basis. The name of that temptation is worldliness.

"Worldliness" is, to be sure, a term that we need to be careful with, because we are not and cannot be anti-world. If we say that we have given into the world, which is basically what worldliness means, we shouldn't think that the alternative is living outside the only world that we as creatures of flesh and blood know, and through which we know all else. Instead, as we are often fond of quoting St. John, we as Christians are in the world although we are not of the world. We work in the world, and God has even given us callings in the world by which we are to work out our salvation in fear and trembling. Through these vocations, we serve others and we shape ourselves, and we gain substance that we may use to help others and to support the work of the church. Such work and the way we do it puts real flesh on the bones and sinews of our faith. So, too, does the service that we offer the communities of the world in which we live. Members of this congregation are exceptional in that regard. According to the congregational survey we

took about a year ago, the members of this congregation are involved in their communities, and contribute their time and talents to them, at vastly higher percentages than is the average for all congregations of similar size, and even at a higher percentage than the average for Presbyterian churches, which in general have a high average .

No, the problem of worldliness is not that of being involved with the world; being involved deeply in the world may well be a sign of faith. Rather, the problem is when the world and its standards become the measure of our faith, and when our faith no longer really is the measure of the work we do, nor of its quality. Worldliness is when the gospel and the form of life to which it calls us become domesticated and tame, when they become our creatures. Worldliness comes when we confuse the nice with the good, and the good with the good enough. It is when grace is, as Dietrich Bonhoeffer once put it, cheap; when it costs us nothing, because it calls us to so little. Grace is cheap, for example, when forgiving others is a deal we make with ourselves so that nothing hard may be expected of us in return. Worldliness is when there is no hard edge on God's word, and when in order to get along we go along, and round all the edges off. It is cheap grace when we expect God to make up deficiencies that we, in fact, cultivate and delight in.

Let me be more concrete by giving an example of worldliness from one of the greatest moral theologians of the nineteenth century, the British novelist Anthony Trollope. Trollope rarely mentions God and faith explicitly in his many novels. But few have ever better known and articulated how faith and morals are actually lived than Trollope has. Jane Austen is his only rival.

In his largest novel, *The Way We Live Now*, one of the chief characters is Lady Carbury. She is the widow of a man who had a title, but no money; what little money he left has already been squandered by the son. Lady Carbury, as Trollope's own mother did, writes historical

novels for a living. They are not very good novels, and she is not at all deceived on this score. Literature is not her aim, but income. Since she does chiefly aim at selling her books, the quality of the research and the style matters little. What does matter is that she ingratiate herself with publishers and with the editors of literary reviews. By rendering service to them, and by writing reviews full of praise for other mediocre novelists, she helps to ensure that her own novels will be noted in the press, and receive good reviews. She doesn't necessarily do this for selfish motives; she is particularly concerned about the future prospects of her son, who is one of the most morally feckless characters in the literature of any language. She isn't greedy, but she is worldly. This is precisely how Trollope describes her: as worldly. In the way he does so he puts his finger on what worldliness is. He says: "The woman was affectionate, seeking good things for others rather than for herself; but she was essentially worldly, believing that good could come out of evil, that falsehood might in certain conditions be better than truth, that shams and pretences might do the work of true service, that a strong house could be built upon the sand!"

Now, part of Trollope's point in that description is to say something, I suppose, about mediocre art and literature and how it is produced. In greater part, he wants to use it to say something about the great financial crash that is at the center of the novel and that ruins many. That crash is the result of a decaying and morally dissolute aristocracy, who by having made a lot of moral compromises, by having consistently rounded off all the moral corners and by having failed to pay attention, finds itself prey to the shams and pretences of financial speculators. The resulting economic crash is a pretty good demonstration of what it means to build a house on sand. That is the reason why *Newsweek* this last spring recommended the novel as something that twenty-first century Americans should read while looking at their depleted stock portfolios and contemplating the economic houses that they, too, built on sand.

But worldliness is also something other than a threat to economic security, especially when one is talking about morals or about the relation of one's soul to God and to the world. Worldliness is not always punished in the way that reckless investing is sooner or later. In fact, in the world, worldliness really can be successful, at least in the short term. Worldliness is actually a matter of being successful in the world. And if it sometimes involves lies, that is because the reason that people lie or cheat is because it is effective to do so. But this doesn't mean that worldliness is not also very charming and witty. It usually is. Worldly people are fun to be with, and their lives can be very attractive. Yet, the problem with worldliness, oddly enough, is how little it admits into our own minds the larger world. It appears liberal and open but that is because it is never strict. It is tolerant, but that is because it is self forgiving and doesn't like thinking differences through. It is fun and appears to move easily around the whole world but that is because it denies itself little.

But it is, in the end, locked in on itself, and its easiness is a sort of moral survival of the fittest. Worldliness is disarming, it may be charming, it is tolerant and easy going, and it may even be generous, but it is not really open. It is certainly not steady nor is it to be counted on in tough times, and it can offer no transformation for those who are in deep trouble. Lady Carbury, for example, while a nice enough woman, by tolerating her son's dissoluteness, pretty much determines a sad and pathetic outcome for him. She keeps trying to underwrite deals that will help to advance him in the world, but the moral shortcuts those deals involve only encourage him to become weaker and weaker, and more and more despised as cowardly, self indulgent, and ultimately pathetic, even in the eyes of his friends to whom he tries to justify his sad behavior. Consider her easy morality in contrast to the advice in *Hamlet* that Polonius gave to his son as he was about to go off to college: "To thine own self be true, and then it must follow as the night the

day, that thou cans't not be false to any man." It isn't easy to be true to yourself or others, and worldliness doesn't encourage you to be so. Because he always took the easy way, her son never was true to himself, nor could he be.

The reason that I say that worldliness is locked in on itself, despite its oft admired sophistication and urbanity, and that it is not to be counted on in tough times, and that it cannot really take others into itself, is simply because it sees no farther than the world and what the world can provide. The world, we know, has limited resources, so that what one person has in his hands, another person doesn't have. So in the world we have to compete for resources and be aware of their distribution for the sake of our own survival, we think. Worldliness understands nothing of infinite resources – of infinite love, of infinite joy, of infinite gifts, of infinite sacrifice. So here then is a key to worldliness. It doesn't see anything beyond worldly gain and so for the sake of one's survival any sacrifice that doesn't have a tangible or social return makes no sense. Being worldly always means keeping something back; the worldly always has a reserve when giving of himself or his substance. Its even a law of life, we think.

Let me put all this in terms of the story of the young man who came to Jesus and who asked what he needed to do in order to inherit eternal life. He certainly is not an immoral person; he is a good person without question. He has kept the commandments. His aspirations are even high, as he asks what he must do to inherit eternal life. But Jesus seems to see just where the man's joys are, and by telling him that he must go and sell everything he puts up a mirror designed to show the young man where those joys really are. As a result, when Jesus then tells him that eternal life is going to cost everything, we are told that the young man goes away "*shocked*." We are also told that he grieves because he has many possessions, and obviously it hurts him to think of giving them up. But still I think that the most interesting reaction that he

shows is the first one, namely, that he is shocked. He never dreamed of this kind of response. He had never thought of making this kind of sacrifice. He had never connected eternal life with sacrifice or with giving everything of himself. When the possibility was then presented to him, his imagination failed him. The equation of eternal life with giving all of himself had never registered with him. And yet that *is* the equation.

The philosopher Benedict Spinoza, who was no Christian but was pretty wise in his own right, once noted that happiness is not the result of virtue; rather, he said, virtue *is* happiness; it is the same thing. In a similar way, we might say that eternal life is not the result of a prudent investment in keeping the law; eternal life *is* the life that gives all of itself to others, it *is* the form of life that doesn't count the cost. Worldliness, on the other hand, just plain doesn't understand that sort of equation. It is shocked to hear such a thing suggested for it always counts the cost; it has to. That doesn't keep it from seeing that certain things may require being generous or that it is sometimes fun to be generous, especially in times of plenty, or if somebody or something is really important to you; on such occasions the worldly one will be generous and expend herself. It is even to her advantage. But worldliness also knows a bargain when it sees one, and it believes that it must conserve its resources and portion them out because the resources that it shepherds are finite. Thus, like Lady Carbury, while the worldly person is nice enough, and often even generous, he or she is usually willing to cut moral corners, especially if pressed, or, if everybody does it. Such a person is willing to fudge on the truth if it is easier that way, and to give half commitments, especially if something more interesting or important comes up. After all, she asks, who can deny me the advantage in the personal investment that I am making? And, after all, somebody else can do it surely, can't they? Worldliness doesn't understand the equation that eternal life is matter of giving oneself fully to God and others; it can only understand the

equation of deals that improve one's lot in this life, it misses out on what eternal life is all about.

Now, what does all this have to do with stewardship? Very simply, Christian stewardship *is* the equation that eternal life is giving all of oneself to God and to others. It is not an investment in a good institution, it is not just helping out, it is not a canny accounting of where our money may do the most good, nor is it even a matter of rewarding or punishing the session or minister. It is not something that can be put in the same balance with anything else we do. There, of course, is a balance sheet in any church, and whatever programs and staff the church has are what its members are willing to pay for. If they won't pay for them, they won't have them. But that balance sheet is not stewardship itself, for the issue of stewardship is somewhere else. For stewardship is a matter of inviting you into a life where you don't count the cost, where you don't build your house on sand, and where you do take and give joy to the whole world and where you find the *whole* world, not a shrunken one of limited resources for which we have to compete. Seize therefore the opportunity and give yourself to the world. If you do, what you will find really is eternal life.