

A QUESTION OF VALUES



Luke 12:18 "Then (Jesus) told (the crowd) a parable: 'The land of a rich man produced abundantly. And he thought to himself, 'What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?' Then he said, 'I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods.'"

As we move forward as a nation in our mid-term election cycle, with inflation rampant around the world, and American

families are struggling to make ends meet. It is reported in the press that the standard of living in America continues to decline, so much so that our children may be the first generation ever in the history of this country not to be better off than their parents. Yet, when we talk about our standard of living, what exactly do we mean? How is that measured? --- Usually, the standard of living is determined by the amount of our income in comparison to others, or by the size of our homes, or by the number of the possessions we have amassed, or by how much food and drink we enjoy, or even by our ability to take exotic vacations or buy luxury products. The standard of living in this country is identified with the outward and visible signs of our life, with our wealth and our status, like with the rich man in Jesus' parable this morning, who had no place to store the excess of his harvest. These are the values of the world we live in.

For we are part of a culture where wealth matters. The game show title "Who Wants to Be A Millionaire?" was rhetorical, because it is assumed that of course everyone wants to be a millionaire. Our states and governments even run lotteries to raise revenue from the willingness of its own citizens to gamble for wealth. Meanwhile our Manufacturing Industry promotes, by very design, the newest and latest in a constantly changing

sense of what is in and what is out this season, what is hot and what is not. Clothes, for example, are not simply meant any longer to cover our bodies and keep us warm; no, they are now fashion statements about who we are. Labels are important. The reporters ask the actresses on the red carpet before the Academy Awards whose dress they are wearing, because that matters in our society. What we eat or drink is likewise measured, or where we eat or drink it, or how much food and drink, because it makes a statement about who we are and what we have. Food is not meant simply to sustain our bodies any longer, but to comfort and please us and to affirm our status in life; --- and not surprising then, we have an obesity epidemic in this country, as we also struggle with alcoholism and chemical dependency.

So, when we talk about our standard of living, we are talking about what and how much we have in comparison to others. We are talking about what kind of clothes we wear, and food we eat. We are talking about how much we sow and reap and gather into our barns. These are our cultural values: money, power, possessions. And sadly, our standard of living is identified solely with the outward and visible signs of wealth and status.

In the Gospels, however, Jesus suggests a different set of values for his followers, where we are not supposed to be concerned with what we eat or drink, or what we wear, or how

much we can stuff into our barns. Jesus suggests a very different set of values, where concern for the poor, for the orphan and the widow, for women and social outcasts, for the sick and suffering, where *these* concerns are paramount, where *these* concerns are what really matters in life. Jesus tells us to seek ye first the kingdom of God and God's righteousness. Jesus reminds us of the words of the prophet Micah, "God has told you, O mortal, what is good;" wrote Micah. "And what does the LORD require of you, but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" --- If there really is a Cultural War going on in this country, as many political pundits declare, then this may be it, I believe. It is a question of our values.

So, which set of these values do we represent? The Christian values of justice, compassion and peace, or our worldly values of money, power, and prestige? Which matter more to us? Because Jesus reminds us that we cannot have them both, "No one can serve two masters;" he said, "for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon." 'Our lives do not consist in the abundance of possessions,' Jesus reminds us in today's parable. And indeed, if there is such a clear distinction between the values which Jesus espoused and

those of the world, can we clearly see that difference in the world around us; can people clearly identify who are the Christians and who are not in our society? Do your neighbors know what you believe? Can they tell that you are Christians by what you value, by how you live your lives? And if not, why not?

I fight this battle all the time now with my children. I raised them all in what I believed was a good Christian home. They attended church regularly and were active in the Sunday School and programs of the Church growing up. Church was fun for them, they readily admit. They were also well fed and clothed at home, and educated, mostly in private schools, because education was important to us. But *their* values reflect more the values of the world we live in than those of Jesus. They usually drive nicer cars than Lisa and I do, for instance, and they were embarrassed by the little economical scooter that I rode about in Bridgeport for years on end. They have more clothes than they need, endlessly buying more and more, whatever the latest fashion is, and they seem ashamed by my clothes, by my worn blue jeans and faded clergy shirts, by my moth-eaten sweaters and hand-me-down suits, and by my unshaven beard and greying hair. "You know they have products for that," my children tell me. It is a question of values, I tell them, of what is important in life.

My life is different from theirs, I say, on purpose. And sure enough, they agree and are amused that that Lisa and I tend to clean our own house, wash our own cars, shovel our own snow, mow our own grass, that we grow some of our own vegetables in the summer, that I make our own wine year round, that Lisa cuts my hair, and we do our own taxes, that we live simply, we say, so that others can simply live, so much so that together Lisa and I give about 15% of our income away to our churches and our favorite charities. We live a different kind of life than they do. They, on the other hand, have all the latest electronic gadgets, whatever the newest fad may be. They have designer labels on their clothes and expensive food tastes, but they give little or no money, or any of their time, to charity and the needs of the poor. They are too busy with their own lives, and with keeping up their own standard of living, to really care for others, especially the socially unacceptable, especially those who make them feel uncomfortable, the poor, the sick, the dying, the stranger in our midst. They say that the most important value in their lives is concern about climate change, but then they simply blame it on our generation without engaging in any actions to address it. Lisa and I are the ones who has been recycling and composting for years, who have solar panels on our roof and solar batteries in the basement, we installed geo-

thermal heating and air-conditioning, we have reduced the amount of grass we have in our yard, I drove a scooter in Bridgeport and an electric vehicle now. So, what are they doing, if this is what really matters to them? Little, I fear. They are spoiled white suburban kids. They are self-indulgent. They are like so many others of their generation, and at times, I am embarrassed by them.

So then, which side of the Cultural War are you on? Are you more interested in how much money you can earn, how many possessions you can stuff in your barns, or what you eat or the label on your dress --- or are you more concerned about climate change and/or the needs of the poor and the marginalized in this community, and in the injustices in our nation? And if so, what are you doing to address these issues, or the needs of those struggling in our communities? How much of your time or money do you actually give to local charities and initiatives? What values do our lives reflect to others as most important to us? One needs only to look at our checkbooks and our calendars to see what is important to us, to see what we do with our money and our time. Are we more interested in mercy and justice, or in money and power? For Jesus reminds us that we cannot have them both, "No one can serve two masters . . . You cannot serve God

and wealth," for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions. So, whom are we serving then? Amen.