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24th after Pentecost

I Timothy 6:6-10, 17-19

Matthew 20: 20- 28

Dessert First! Control, Materialism and Human Worth

Two men found themselves stranded on a small tropical island. One of the men decided he would reconnoiter the island and see what they could use for their survival. The other man wasn't interested.

He stretched out on the beach and went to sleep.

Undeterred, the first man set off and circumnavigated the island in less than a day. He came back, flopped down on the sand next to the second man and with great distress reported that there was nothing to eat on the island. No coconuts—nothing. Even the drinkable water was going to be quite a trek.

The second man didn't seem too concerned, and said, "Relax, everything is going to be fine."

The first man growing more agitated said, "Don't you get it! We are in the middle of no where, with nothing to eat! We have no way of communicating—no one knows we are even alive --we are going to DIE on this island!

But the second man said, "I told you relax—it's going to be okay."

The first man, holding his head in his hands said, "Are you crazy?"

The second man sat up and said, "Look, you don't understand. I give 10,000 a month to my church. My pastor will find me."

This man knew his worth! Now folks I want to assure you—when you are absent from church my eyes do not roll minus dollar signs.

"When Charles B. Darrow proposed a new board game called Monopoly to Parker Brothers in 1934, the all-knowing executives rejected it due to '52 design errors.' But Darrow, a true

believer, started printing and selling the game himself. The rest is history:

John Ortberg writes of growing up with a grandmother who was a ruthless competitor at Monopoly. She played against her grandchildren and won nearly every time.

But one day young John managed to win. As most kids will do, he made the most of his rare victory; he raked all the play money, and tokens and markers toward him and gloated arrogantly in his triumph.

The grandmother smiled and said, 'Just remember, John—it all goes back in the box. All the money, all the hotels and motels and game tokens; at the end of the game, it all goes back in the box.'¹

There's a lesson here some where in this story isn't there? That must have been a pretty deflating thing to realize for a youngster: it all goes back in the box.

For us oldsters it has an obvious double meaning--as in "there are no pockets in shrouds"—we can't take it with us—but we can pay it forward!² It just all depends on what we value, how we feel about our own self-worth and the materialism we are surrounded by and how we play the game of life.

We all want to succeed.

The disciples James and John are no different than anyone else. They want to succeed. Their mother is like all mothers—she wants them to succeed—to see them secure and successful and in her world that means achieving a certain amount of status so she makes her request of Jesus.

Of course the other disciples get pretty upset. Probably because they didn't have the hutzpah to ask first. Or a mother along to push the issue.

Notice Jesus doesn't come down hard on them. There is nothing wrong with desiring appropriate appreciation or wanting to succeed in

¹ 40 Day Spiritual Journey to a More Generous Life, p. 58.

² Ibid.

life. Its more as Jesus teaches us in this gospel, about how we understand what success means and how we understand our self-worth.

Jesus gathers his disciples together and gives them a different way to vision their self-worth. He says, "...whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be your slave."

In our culture, we communicate more and more that a person is not successful in life unless they make a lot of money. A recent survey of young college graduates said it is very important to make as much money as possible and they were very optimistic they would be millionaires.

Let's face it. When we have money we feel more in control of our lives. If we have a financial mishap, we feel very much out of control. The things we can purchase are often symbols of our self-image. We all have in our minds a certain level of material security that we have established as signifying our "arrival" in life—definite goals we want to reach in order to feel we are successful or have arrived in the adult world. Conversely, not attaining those goals or any set back reflects very badly on us and we take it very very personally.

I just went through an incident with my mother in which she was the subject of an unfair debt collection. The time, energy, frustration and inability to resolve the issue left us both in a state of emotional powerlessness and anger.

My mom felt diminished because she blamed herself for what she saw as foolish decision in hind sight.

The fact of the matter is senior adults are preyed upon every day by deceptive sales presentations, credit card scams and the like. Scammers know that the emotional pain of fighting will eventually wear the older adult down until they just give in to get rid of the problem—put away the shame of the experience and so they can feel back in control of their lives again.

Every one needs control in their lives. But some people find that their self-worth is tied up in

control—control of other people's lives, control over every thing around them. They have to get their own way or they feel personally rejected.

"The human quest for greatness and power has caused untold meaningless bloodshed. But, ironically God's call to servanthood cause the most meaningful bloodshed of all—Jesus' own sacrifice on the cross.

If we want to know the true aim and direction of our life, we need to ask ourselves: Where do we expend the greatest effort and energy. Is it to unconsciously dominate others and gain control? Or is it to love and serve them?

What is more important to us—taking charge, or meeting needs? Do we find gratification in the doing or serving or do we have a burning desire to be recognized?³ Now don't get me wrong—affirmation is very significant and important for all of us. Nothing wrong with needing affirmation anymore than succeeding in life. Its when that desire begins to control or motivate the majority of what we do that there is a problem—it's like we are stuck—like a needle on an scratched record. Boy does that date me! Younger people—think "Ground Hog Day."

If the answer is a burning desire to be recognized, some interior growth work is in order because a very crucial and important developmental need in our lives was not met as we were growing up. Perhaps because of neglect or constant discounting of anything attempted or criticism. This is the kind of thing a good counselor can help us with to get us "unstuck."

I personally have found therapy to be the free space on the bingo board of life—a true gift that opens the door to growing into one's full human potential.

I can't possibly place a dollar amount on what I have gained from choosing to work on my self-worth and personal growth through counseling. But I do know it is far more valuable than any of the material things I own.

Counseling isn't inexpensive. It costs money. But the investment is well worth it.

³ Spiritual Formation Bible exercise for Matt. 20: 20-28

Or I could choose to find their self worth in things or control of others. It's a choice isn't it?

I just made a value statement didn't I?

It's all about what we value. And the choices we make reflect our values.

The desire for money and what money provides is a value laden topic. And Christian books about money sometimes give very mixed messages.

On the one hand we hear in the media about mega churches that preach the Prosperity Gospel. This is a kind of, "If you can't beat the materialistic culture—join em" theology.

As a result, however, Senator Grassley is investigating the way mega churches use their members funds because of the luxuries some of these church's leaders have surrounded themselves with. The senator questions the purchase of luxury homes and cars by clergy as hypocritical even though these ministries also trumpet their giving to the poor.

Basically the prosperity gospel teaches that God "wants you to be financially successful. If you pray right and have the right intentions. God will see to it that you are rewarded with material success. And of course you should respond by giving a great deal of money to the church and to other charitable causes."⁴

The other message we get is, "Money is the root of all evil, and it's wrong for a Christian to want to be financially successful. If one is successful financially, then there is an awesome responsibility to use that money to benefit others. This view implies and sometimes blatantly states that persons who have been financially successful should be ashamed of their success."⁵

Both of these positions leave a great deal to be desired. The first is a license to money lust and the second is a huge guilt trip. Yet each has some truth and because they appeal to scripture to legitimize their position it's harder for us to navigate our own understandings.

⁴ Steve Clapp, Cell Phones, Dessert and Faith, p. 63,

⁵ Ibid.

The bible doesn't say money is evil nor does it condemn financial success. It says that the pursuit of money and wealth can become a major obstacle—or even an idol if money controls us. It can lead to or be the root of evil. And in our culture—well—need I say more—just pick up the newspaper. The pursuit of wealth can destroy lives.

But that's true of fire as well. We can use it appropriately or it can burn us. But we don't say it's evil and shun it. By the same token God does want us to be provided for—all of us. We all have legitimate needs.

Steve Clapp, author of our Dessert First stewardship devotional offers this set of conditions he suggests Christians use as we achieve financial success:

Condition One: We do not achieve financial success by dishonesty, cruelty or manipulation.

Condition Two: We recognize the material blessings that we have as coming from God, and we share those resource with the church and persons in need.

Condition Three: We do not let the drive for financial success become the most important drive in our lives.

Condition Four: We do not conclude we are better, more intelligent, or more spiritual persons than those who are less successful financially. That's just not true. Nor are we inferior to persons who have more wealth than we do.

I would add a fifth condition: That we educate ourselves about what the economic realities are in the world around us—within our own nation which is the wealthiest nation in the world today, and what the Gross National Product is for other nations.

Why do this? Because it's God's world. And as Christians we are citizens of God's creation—the whole world—or I should say the whole family of God.

Families look out for one another. Care about each member's welfare and about the family's overall living conditions.

Also, it is eye opening to have a first hand understanding or experience of other countries economic realities. It helps us to get distance on our own neck of the woods by giving us a larger perspective.

In the September/October Alive Now devotional there's a little piece titled, "How Many People Will One Chicken Serve?" in which Peggy Noll recounts an experience in Uganda when she asks a Ugandan friend how many people she thought one chicken would serve---What would we say to that question? I would probably say six at most.

Her Ugandan friend's answer? "How many people are there?"⁶

In other words.... (wait for answer) Yes— as many people as there are. May we, like Jesus, live with such glad and generous hearts towards others with what ever we have!

⁶ Alive Now, September/October 2007, p. 35