

25th Sunday of Ordinary Time “Mammon and Discipleship”

Fr Frank Schuster

A young man once asked God how long a million years was to him. God replied, "A million years to me is just like a single second to you." The young man asked God what a million dollars was to him. God replied, "A million dollars to me is just like a single penny to you." Then the young man got his courage up and asked, "God, could I have one of your pennies?" God smiled and replied, "Sure, just a second." --Anonymous

Jesus says that we cannot serve both God and mammon. Jesus is asking us to make God the first priority in everything. Of course mammon is commonly misunderstood as referring to just money. The idea of mammon is a little more complex. Mammon is defined by Webster's as "riches, greed, and worldly gain personified as a false god in the New Testament." Mammon is defined as "riches considered as an evil influence of object or worship." Instead of the question, what do I own, the question becomes, what owns me? That's mammon.

You see, money in itself is a neutral thing, neither good nor evil. Money is a means to an end whereby we are able to get things necessary for our well-being, and the well-being of our family and community. Mammon, however, is the perversion whereby money or possessions cease to be the means to an end and rather becomes the end unto itself, thereby manifesting itself as more important than God and the people around us as we see so clearly in the first reading from the Prophet Amos.

My friends, when money, riches or possessions become more important than our family members, for example, we know that money ceases to be neutral. Whenever we treat other human beings solely as a means to the end for obtaining money, for example, money ceases to be money and becomes mammon. We know that money or possessions ought to never be more important than other human beings. This is why I have no problem with that shiny new car some people can afford. From my perspective, the people who build and sell these cars have children with braces too and shiny new cars can be a lot of fun if you can truly afford them. On the other hand, if owning a shiny new car is something you can't really afford or somehow becomes more important than the needs of your family, or the education or well-being of your children, or doing your part for the care of your community, Houston we have a problem. It is a priority issue. Money becomes mammon.

There are many of us here who are good stewards of their money. There are many of us here who are working on it. Good stewards don't get caught by credit card debt. Good stewards don't buy things that they can't afford. They have savings to draw from when unexpected things happen. Their family is their first priority and they give their first fruits to God, which is to say they plan their giving to worthy organizations rather than giving what happens to be left over at the end of the month. Discipleship of Jesus clearly includes working on becoming better stewards of our time, talent and treasure. The point of the Gospel today is: Everything is a gift from God. Everything is a gift

from God. We must always remember God does not owe us anything, and yet He gives us everything. The challenge is to not let any of God's gifts to become mammon, treating His gifts as if they are more important than God, family or neighbor.

I think our grandparents' and great-grandparents' generations understood this better than our present generation. I don't think this is an overgeneralization. Tom Brokaw's book "The Greatest Generation" talks about this. I think it is good to think about how previous generations in general handled their money and possessions. For example, during the Great Depression, my grandfather rode the rails trying to find work to survive. There wasn't the same kind of social nets that we have today. In the Great Depression, people could literally starve to death if they couldn't find food. That experience of being homeless, working long hours for pennies, before finally landing a job with the railroad made my grandfather the most frugal person you ever met. How frugal was he? Well, I'll tell you. When I visited my grandparents in their older years, sometimes I would be asked to go grocery shopping for them. My grandfather would literally ask me to go to three different stores to pick up grocery items based on where the "deals" were for the specific items. Moreover, if I was ever caught getting everything at one store to save time and, God forbid, spending a dime or a nickel over what I could have saved by going to another store, he could get really, really grumpy with me when I showed him the receipt. On the other hand, my grandfather and his generation was far more generous to the Church and worthy organizations than I was at the time. The only entertainment system in my grandparent's home was a piano and anyone was welcome to play it. Popcorn and lemonade wasn't for watching movies on a big screen, it was for sitting around the dining room table so we can hear each other's stories. And, as frugal as my grandparents' were when it came to having possessions, they were very generous to us grandchildren when birthdays and holidays came around. They never had any credit card debt. Come to think of it. I don't think they even had credit cards. On the other hand, no one who came to their door needing help was ever denied. It might have not been much, but as frugal as my grandparents were, they consistently put people before money. I mention this simply because our generations' relationship with money, possessions and entertainment is clearly different than previous generations' understanding and this difference is worth considering.

And so, we can ask ourselves, what does my relationship with money and possessions look like? Am I good steward of my resources or am I reckless? Do I put my relationship with God, family members and community first or does money and possessions come first? Are there things in my life that can properly fit under the definition of mammon? I think it is spiritually helpful for us to ask that question from time to time. And so, in that spirit, I would like to conclude with the wisdom of St. Robert Bellarmine whose feast day was last week. He writes, "If you are wise, know that you have been created for the glory of God and your own eternal salvation. This is your goal; this is the center of your life; this is the treasure of your heart. If you reach this goal, you will find happiness. If you fail to reach it, you will find misery. May you consider truly good whatever leads to your goal and truly evil whatever makes you fall away from it. Prosperity and adversity, wealth and poverty, health and sickness, honors and humiliations, life and death, in the mind of the wise man, are not to be sought for their

own sake, nor avoided for their own sake. But if they contribute to the glory of God and your eternal happiness, then they are good and should be sought. If they detract from this, they are evil and to be avoided.”

My friends, we know that God wills everyone to be saved and come to knowledge of the truth. Jesus wants us to find joy in this life and in the next. Nothing can keep us from that vocation except ourselves.