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## God and the Economy

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Invocation: *In the name of God: Our Creator, Defender, Redeemer, & Friend. Amen*

Like the rest of us here today, I've had a little financial challenge lately.

That's such an understatement, I thought I should wait a minute to let the laughter die down.

Oh well, as I was saying, like the rest of us I'm having some financial challenges nowadays. However, unlike most of us, I'm also a college professor; a religion professor, to be precise. So: I get to work-out some of my issues in the classroom! That's why I'm teaching a course this semester on "guess what?" on *God and the economy*.

Now, as you may also know, economics has been called, "the *dismal science*." So to lighten things up a bit I've asked students to submit *jokes* that connect religion and economics. Here are a couple of the jokes that students have submitted, and that also, quite usefully, connect with our scriptures appointed for today "thanks be to God."

The first joke is called, "The Catholic Dog."

A farmer lived alone in the Irish countryside except for a pet dog he loved dearly. One day the dog died and the farmer went to the parish priest, to inquire if a mass could be said for the dead pet. Father Patrick told the farmer: "No, we can't have services for an animal in the church, but I tell you what. There's a new denomination down the road, and no telling what they believe in. Maybe they'll do something for the animal."

The farmer said: "Thanks, Father, I'll go right away. By the way, do you think 50 thousand is enough to donate to the church for such a service?" At this point, without skipping a beat, Father Patrick replied: "Why didn't you tell me the dog was Catholic?" ([Church Life Humor](#))

Well, I'm encouraged to get some response today for that one. When one of our students read that aloud in class the other day it was a little unnerving. I don't mind telling you that nobody laughed but me! Now, what is *that*: some kind of a generation gap?

Oh well, there was no better response to a second joke offered the following week by another student. But this one also connects to our gospel for today. So I'll tell it here as well. This one's called, "The Pope and the Business Man."

During a Papal audience a trader in fast food chains approached the Pope and made this offer: "I have a business proposal for you. Change the last line of the Lord's Prayer from "give us this day our daily bread" to "give us this day our daily chicken." And I'll have KFC" the global Kentucky Fried Chicken chain "donate 10 million dollars to Catholic charities." Respectfully the Pontiff declined.

Two weeks later the man approached the Pope again, this time with a 50 million dollar offer. Again His Holiness declined.

A month later the man offers 100 million. And this time, unlike before, the Pope accepts. Later, at a meeting of the cardinals, he announces his decision in the format, "I have some good news and I have some bad news."

"The good news is ... we have 100 million dollars to distribute to our many charities. The bad news is ... we lost the Wonder Bread account!"

So there you have it. Two examples of humor to lighten-up my Emory course on God and the economy this semester. And I hope you can join me in appreciating that the students are doing their best to accommodate me and find such examples, even if they don't find them very funny themselves. And now, here's the connection to our scripture readings that I promised.

(Jesus said) No one can serve two masters; 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 wealth (Matthew 6.24).

So there's the connection, of course. But as we say in the Black Church tradition, "Preacher, make it *plain!*" So let me state the obvious: the jokes we just heard present humorous examples, and very obvious examples, of religious persons trying to "serve two masters;" that is, trying to serve "God" on the one hand, and "wealth" on the other. The connection between the jokes and the scriptures is as simple as that, and no more complicated than that.

As Mark Twain said famously, "It ain't the things in the Bible that I don't understand that bother me; it's the things I *do* understand that bother me."

Now, speaking of being "bothered," in this time of economic stress one observer has coined the term, "spiritual madness," to describe a widespread condition of being bothered. Known as an energy healer, Caroline Myss describes spiritual madness as a condition in which we find ourselves suspended between two opposing commitments.

Many of her clients, she says, have committed themselves to a spiritual path that involves the renunciation of materialism and the affirmation of higher values such as generosity, compassion, hope, and trust. On the other hand, she says, those same clients have made a competing commitment that is the polar opposite of their spiritual path; commitments to "get ahead," keep up, don't lose-out, or have it all. The resulting conflict and torment that goes on inside them she calls "spiritual madness." [Spiritual Madness](#)

The solution to this crisis of indecision, of course, is to choose one or the other set of commitments. This is the solution clearly stated in our biblical tradition in the book of Joshua:

"Now therefore revere the Lord, and serve him in sincerity and in faithfulness; put away the gods that your ancestors served beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the Lord.

[Yet] if you are unwilling to serve the Lord, choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your ancestors served in the region beyond the River or the gods of [those] in whose land you are living; but as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord' (Joshua 24.14-15).

"Choose this day whom you will serve," is the clear resolution of the spiritual madness resulting from opposed spiritual commitments. It was the solution announced ages ago in the Hebrew Bible by Joshua, then reprised centuries later in today's gospel reading by that other "Joshua" Yeshua or Jesus, and it is being prescribed still by living spiritual teachers today.

Now as your local college professor here today, allow me to assign you a little test. It's a self-test to determine how affected we are by this spiritual malady of opposing commitments. "Choose this day" between the words of two iconic figures in our American national identity. Let's see which of them we find more compelling.

This is only a test, but it is instructive because it offers us a clear choice between our Lord's words in today's gospel and this all-American creed from the pen of one of our founding fathers, Benjamin Franklin. Our American economic creed includes his famous platitude, "time is money."

Remember, [Franklin wrote] that *time is money*. He that can earn ten shillings a day by his labor, and goes abroad, or sits idle, one half of that day, though he spends but sixpence during his diversion or idleness, ought not to reckon *that* the only expense; he has really spent, or rather thrown away, five shillings besides ...

Remember, that money is the *prolific, generating nature*. Money can beget money, and its offspring can beget more, and so on. Five shillings turned is six, turned again is seven and threepence, and so on, till it becomes a hundred pounds. The more there is of it, the more it produces every turning, so that the profits rise quicker and quicker ... to the thousandth generation ... [Otherwise one] destroys all that it might have produced, even scores of pounds.

So much from Franklin. By the way, Max Weber, founder of sociology of religion, clarified Franklin's purpose in the following way. Writing in his own work he quotes Franklin's creed that we just read "in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1904/1945). There, Weber noted that Franklin was not after sheer greed, avarice, or profit for its own sake. Rather his language is full of moral righteousness, obligation and duty. "Indeed, Franklin claims that God revealed to him the usefulness of virtue" (Max Weber, "[The Protestant Ethic and The Spirit of Capitalism](#)" [Penguin Books, 2002] translated by Peter Baehr and Gordon C. Wells).

Now I wonder how many of us in his room are like me. If you *are* like me, we're so hard-wired by today's economic pressures that when we hear Franklin expound that "'time is money' we can hardly stay in our seats until we can get out there and get back to work" "the sooner the better! Reading it last week I felt such compunctions of guilt I wanted to run out the door just to get something done.

*But thanks be to God!* there's another voice in the room today: the voice of our Lord Jesus Christ speaking things more profitable for our souls than Franklin's moral code. Listen again to our Lord's contrasting claim on us:

Therefore do not worry, saying, 'What will we eat?' or 'What will we drink?' or 'What will we wear?'

For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things.

But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.

So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today's trouble is enough for today" (Matthew 6.31-34).

So there's our test. Which of these voices do we choose to have ultimate authority and commitment in our lives? Now I wish I could say that I trust us to make the gospel choice, but I hardly trust myself in this matter. Nevertheless, if we are ever to escape what Weber called "the iron cage" of this economic system we have inherited, then I *need* you to make the gospel choice; or rather, in order to dismantle our own iron cage we need each *other's* help to make the gospel choice.

And so, in order to empower us to make this choice, and to seal it in our hearts and minds, I invite you to pray with me the words of our Collect appointed for today that we heard at the beginning of our service. Turn with me, if you will, to the front of your worship booklet, and let us pray together our collective prayer found there, the Collect for the Eighth Sunday after the Epiphany.

The Lord be with you . . . Let us pray:

Most loving Father, whose will it is for us to give thanks for all things, to fear nothing but the loss of you, and to cast all our care on you who care for us: Preserve us from faithless fears and worldly anxieties, that no clouds of this mortal life may

hide from us the light of that love which is immortal, and which you have manifested to us in your Son Jesus Christ our Lord; who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen. [Book of Common Prayer (1979), NY: Oxford Univ. Press, 1990), pp. 216-217]

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