

HOW MONEY IS LIKE FOOD
Sermon for Pentecost 19C, Proper 21—1 Tim 6:6-19
LPC, 9/25/16

Have you heard about Maslow's hierarchy of needs? Dr. Maslow has analyzed what human beings need not only to survive but to thrive. The needs range from physiological needs (what the organism needs to live) to self-actualization (what a human being needs to live well.) These needs are usually charted in the form of a pyramid, with physical needs at the bottom, and social and psychological needs in the middle, and what I'd call spiritual needs at the top.

Everyone shares those needs at the bottom of the pyramid: those things you need to live at the most basic level: food and water, air, shelter, clothing. It seems to that as you travel up the pyramid, things vary more and more between individuals. For example all human beings need the society of other human beings, but extroverts are going to need more time in the company of others to be happy and healthy, while introverts are going to need more time alone to be happy and healthy.

Needs are complementary. Pursuing one need to the exclusion of others is obviously unhealthy. To be exclusively concerned with the need for shelter, for example, would mean you never got out to get food or water.

Now, food is a complex need. We eat for pleasure; we eat to feel cared for; we eat to be sociable. Food supplies psychological as well as physiological needs. Most Americans eat far beyond their physiological need for fuel and as a consequence many of us are fat, which actually compromises our ability to survive and thrive.

Solving the problem of abusive eating is problematic. In many cases if something is bad for you, you just eliminate it from your life, but obviously you can't just cut out all food. If you want to lose weight you can't just *not* eat, you have to adjust *how* you eat.

In this regard money is like food.

Not exactly like food, obviously. Money, unlike food, is not a physiological need. There have been, and apparently still are, human societies that don't use money at all. Individuals in societies like these live close to the land, hunting or growing their own food. What we consider "culture" or "civilization" is necessarily limited in these societies, because meeting the basic needs of life without some portable means of exchange is very time-consuming.

Now, every time the computer crashes, or we have to spend an hour on the phone with Comcast sorting out a billing dispute, as I did last week, tempts a lot of us are tempted to chuck it all and go back to a more basic level of existence. But for the most part, being in a modern, money-based society works to our benefit, freeing people from bondage to the land, enabling people to specialize in what they're good at, generally allowing for greater physical and economic mobility, and providing for the cultivation of sophisticated arts and sciences.

So, money can be a good thing. Money is at least a neutral thing. But doesn't scripture say that money is the root of all evil?

Technically, no. The passage we heard today from Paul's First Letter to Timothy is often misquoted that way, but as you just heard, what the scripture actually says is, "Love of money is a root of many kinds of evil." Context suggests that when Paul uses the phrase "love of money" he is specifically talking about the pursuit of wealth, rather than money itself: "In their eagerness to be rich some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pains."

Paul suggests better, more Christian, objects of pursuit: righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance, gentleness. One can only wonder how different this world would be if people pursued these virtues with as much energy as they currently devote to the acquisition of money.

So we have established that money is not evil in itself. But the use of money can be evil. It is in this that money is like food. Too much food, or the wrong kind of food, or the obsessive pursuit of food, can do us evil. Food itself is not evil, and we obviously need food to live. Likewise, some uses of money are evil. Money itself is not evil, and in a money-based economy like ours, we need some money to live. We even need money to do some of the work God has given us to do. At the end of this passage from Timothy, Paul enumerates some of the ways money can be used to do God's work: in doing good, in being rich in good works, generous and ready to share.

So, there are good uses of money and evil uses of money. Obviously if you use your money to take out a contract on someone, that's evil. But in a complex global economy, there are more obscure cases where the expenditure of money can be counter to God's objectives. Does buying this cheap article of clothing support a company that exploits workers? Does this corporation in which I invest engage in shady business practices? Does buying this meat mean that more South American rain forests, which are essential to the health of the planet, are being converted to unsustainable pasture land?

This kind of thing can drive you crazy. And God does not want us to be crazy. God does want us to have some sense of responsibility for our fellow human beings, and base our use of money on this sense of responsibility.

I spoke last week of having something to stand on if we want to be followers of Jesus. What do we stand on in our money dealings, if we want to be followers of Jesus?

As with all parts of our lives, we stand on our baptismal promises: to resist evil, to proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ, to seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving our neighbor as ourselves and to strive for justice and peace among all people, respecting the dignity of every human being. Actually, if you want to follow Jesus you should copy these promises on a card and keep it in your wallet, in your checkbook, with your credit cards, or if you shop online, taped to your computer or on the back of your smart phone.

Money, like food, is an unavoidable part of our lives. It is not a part of our lives we can keep separate from God. No part of our lives can be kept separate from God. Like everything else, we can use money for any purpose we choose. But if we choose to be Christians, we use money for God's purposes and in God's name. We use it all, ultimately, for God.