

September 22, 2019  
Tranona Memorial United Church  
Sermon

Readings: Jeremiah 8:18-22; 9:1, Luke 16:1-13

Invocation: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, our God and our Redeemer. Amen.

Jesus says:

*No slave 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.*

Our society has made that choice. **We worship wealth.** We live in a consumer society. And we despise God. And there is a price to pay for our worship of false gods.

I was struck last week by the reading from Jeremiah:

*At that time it will be said to this people and to  
Jerusalem:  
A hot wind comes from me out of the bare heights  
in the desert towards my poor people,  
not to winnow or cleanse— a wind too strong for  
that.*

That time is now. We can feel **the scorching wind** blowing in from the desert. We have seen that wind devastate the Bahamas, 17% of the population was left homeless. We have seen that wind devastate Puerto Rico. They are still struggling to deal with damage. We have seen that wind blow on Fort McMurray and seen the people fleeing the flames. We have seen that wind burning in British Columbia, and mothers in Vancouver are worried that their children will not be able to breathe for

the smoke. It's a hot wind and its going to get a lot hotter.

**Why** is God sending that devastating wind upon us?

The answer is in our reading today.

*'Why have they provoked me to anger with their images, with their foreign idols?'*

You cannot serve both God and wealth, and our civilization has chosen to worship wealth and despise God.

Climate change is the subject that is in the news right now. It is the scorching wind that gets our attention. But it is only one small aspect of the global environmental devastation. My wife wept the other day when she heard the news of the destruction of the song birds. Rachel Carson's prophecy of a silent spring is coming true.

With Jeremiah we cry: *My joy is gone, grief is upon me, my heart is sick.*

We have created one of the great extinctions of species in the history of life on this planet. The problem is growth. As a species we are too big. We are crowding out the other species. We consume too much, and we create too much pollution. We are disrupting ecological balances.

**Why** are we doing this? Because we worship wealth.

**The goal** of our society is very simple: economic growth. All of the political parties in this Federal election are promising to grow the economy. And by the economy they mean GDP, gross domestic product, in other words the amount we consume. It was Adam Smith whose *Wealth of Nations* taught us that we measure the wealth of a country not by how much it saves, but by how much it consumes. Our politicians promise to grow our consumption exponentially. We know that exponential growth is unsustainable. Growth will eventually hit a limit. It is the ideology of a cancer cell. The cancer cell keeps growing and growing and growing until it kills the

body. Western society is a cancer on the earth: as a cancer disrupts the function of the body, so we are destroying the ecological balances of the earth.

But our politicians say they care about the environment. And they do. We all do. But what happens when the rubber hits the road. What happens when there is a **conflict** between the economy and the environment. We all know the environment loses. Should we build a pipeline to pump out more bitumen, destroying the environment of the North and shipping more fossil fuels to pollute the planet? Of course we build the pipeline, because it means more wealth for oil companies and more wealth for oil workers. Wealth trumps environment.

The sad thing is that with all our wealth, we have a **failed economy**. You can walk down the streets of Winnipeg and see the beggars and the homeless. That is a failed economy. The purpose of an economy is to feed, clothe and house people. Our economy does not do that. Life expectancy is starting to fall. It is a cruel and heartless economy that despises God. But it continues to grow. It continues to consume the planet.

We live in a **democracy**. We elect the government. How can we tolerate this madness?

The political parties give us the answer. They all promise to give us more wealth. They believe that the only question voters ask is "What are you going to do for me." The politicians believe that Canadians are greedy, selfish and cruel. We have a failed democracy. Aristotle divided rule by the people into two types. The good democracy where people were concerned with what was best for the country, and bad democracy where people only cared about themselves. This is the tragedy of individualism. It is the tragedy of worshipping wealth.

So we are not going to do anything about climate change, or the environmental catastrophes we are creating.

But nature has a plan. Nature has a solution. You know when you get an infection then your body develops a fever, and the heat of the fever kills the germs. Nature is doing the same thing with us. It's hot and it's going to get a lot hotter.

We have seen the **people on the move**. People are fleeing climate change and the droughts that it brings with it. People are fleeing starvation and war. The wars over water and food will get worse. The estimates that I trust say that we will lose half our current world population. The future is bleak, and getting bleaker.

Our godless society will be destroyed. Our species is facing a radical **downsizing**. Because we live in an individualist society we tend to think of collapse as a chaos of every man for himself, kill or be killed. That's not the future. That's the present. That's our present social order.

Jeremiah was an optimist. Even though he prophesied the destruction of Jerusalem, he also prophesied that there would be a new Jerusalem, and a new covenant. A downsizing is not the end of the world. Society will adapt. The Mayan Empire collapse, but there are still Mayan people in Guatemala. Enough for Rios Monte to have a genocide. We have all had some experience with downsizing. We have just experienced a radical downsizing of the United Church of Canada. We're still going. We have had to adapt. So our grandchildren will adapt. But today we can plant the seeds of a better society and a better world.

The fundamental flaw in our civilization is the **individualism**. We are totally self-centred. We cannot see ourselves as part of a larger reality, as part of society, or as part of nature. To create a sustainable society we have to be able to see ourselves as part of nature, and to realize that it is God in whom we live and move and have our being.

We don't have to serve wealth. We have **an alternative**. Even though we live in a secular world, we can serve God,. The idea of the secular is a Jewish idea that we inherited. Jeremiah's prophecies were fulfilled. Jerusalem was destroyed. The Babylonians breached the city wall and poured through to destroy the Temple, burn the city and carry off much of the population into captivity and exile in Babylon. But they continued to worship God. The fact that God was punishing them for their sins was proof of the power of God. They knew that the Gods of Babylon were false gods, and no gods at all. They had been carried into a godless society. But they would continue to serve god, even in a godless society. So when we Christians went off into the Roman society with its many false gods, we knew that they were no gods at all, and that Rome was a godless society. And we knew that we could serve god even in a godless Roman Empire. And so today we can serve God even in a godless Canada.

What does it mean to serve God?

I found a wonderful book in the library by an atheist lady. One day her son had asked her, "Some people are catholics, and some people are muslims, and some people are buddhists, what are we?" To which she replied. "Nothing." She realized immediately that that wasn't a very good answer. So she set out to write a book about how an atheist could have all the things that a Christian has. It is fascinating to hear an atheist talk about all the wonderful things that Christians have.

A little bit of her story is necessary here. She was converted to atheism in university. She had signed up for a Christian group on campus, and when she was about to go out to a meeting, her friends made fun of her. So she didn't go and instead became a devout atheist. Now her father had been a theology professor, who attended church on Christmas and Easter. So we can be fairly certain that he

was an atheist. I remember Marcus Borg commenting that he had gone to university and become an agnostic, and then he had gone to seminary and become an atheist. But her grandmother was a devout Christian. And the atheist granddaughter admired the quality of life that her grandmother had.

Her grandmother had a sense of **meaning**. She was a child of god, in a meaningful universe, a universe that God had created.

She had a sense of **belonging**. She was a member of the body of Christ, a member of a loving community.

She had a meaningful **history**. She lived with the story of creation, and story of the exodus, and the story of the crucifixion and resurrection, and the story of the Christian martyrs.

She had a sense of **grace**. Life was a gift, and the marvels of the world around her were gifts from god. All good and perfect gifts come from God. She lived a graceful and a grateful life.

Finally her life had a **purpose**. Jesus summed up the law and the prophets as love the lord your God with all your heart and with all your mind and with all your soul and with all your strength, and your neighbour as yourself. Jesus gave one commandment: Love one another as I have loved you. He gave one mark of the true church, all people will know that you are my disciples by the love you have one for another. St. Paul described all the gifts of the holy spirit as gifts of love. St. John summed it up as Anyone who loves knows god because god is love. So the purpose of her life was to love.

Now. The atheist granddaughter tells us that an atheist can have all these things. The universe may be meaningless, but you are an individual. Christians may have a sense of grace but an atheist can see all good and perfect gifts as coming from the self. As for belonging and history, you could go to these celebrations and pretend.

And finally the purpose of an atheist's life is your job.

That was the one that made me fall off my chair. I've had a lot of jobs in my life, but none of them ever gave my life meaning. Only the ones I do from from love bring meaning to my life.

There are things that as an atheist that she couldn't talk about, but they are important. As Christians we live in the light of the resurrection. God is with us. We are not alone. I believe in the resurrection not only because of the stories in the Bible, but because of my sense of the presence of Christ in my life. Jesus is alive and present with us, here, today. As we gather together to worship, Christ is here with us. In life, in death, in life beyond death God is with us. We are not alone.

So. We live in a **dark**, dark world, and it's going to get darker. But we can be a light in that darkness. We can plant the seeds of a better way, and a better world. Our civilization will collapse, but there is a new civilization aborning. Our grandchildren and great grandchildren will hopefully build a better world.

Jesus says, You cannot serve both god and wealth. He is saying We have a choice. He is saying, I set before you this day life and death. Choose life. Be a source of light in a dying civilization.