

The Business of Purpose

March 11, 2007
“Commerce without Morality”

Rev. Broadbent:

You have to love a church that, despite the fact that we are walking through Lent together, cannot help but celebrate. We have “Happy Birthdays” and “Welcomes” and “Welcome Backs.”

Today we continue along our theme set before us by the great teacher and non-violent activist Mahatma Gandhi. We begin the first Sunday in Lent with the theme “Politics without Principles.” And last Sunday, Reverend Jacque Franklin put before us what it would mean to confess “Wealth without Work”. Today our theme is “Commerce without Morality” – the exchange of goods and services without a sense of the rightness or wrongness of this versus that.

We cannot begin to think about the purpose of business without immersing ourselves in the business of purpose. Speaking of commerce, Brooke and I are in the process of selling our home, which we love; but it is not quite big enough for us. Oh, am I convicted on talking about commerce. In the process of packing up our boxes and cleaning up our clutter, I came across the room I had set up a few years ago during my sabbatical as a meditation space. That fall I would visit it often for half an hour or more each day. Nothing much in it. Just an altar with a candle and a carpet on the floor and two kneeling benches that I made one day.

I realized in that moment how often I have neglected going there to that simple room with a concrete floor and the whitewashed stucco walls – a place of quiet and simplicity. How often I have neglected going there; and to make it even worse, I was going there now to put all of the empty boxes, one for a coffee maker, the other for a microwave, another for a toaster oven, another for our stereo, another for ... they need to go somewhere, and there was some open space that I wasn't using.

It would be easy on a Sunday, when we are focusing on commerce without morality, to rail against Enron and those who cooked the books and brought down a corporation and with it all of its workers and all those pensions, retirement savings, and livelihoods. It would be easy – and today's paper says it even more – to rail against the Halliburton and our government's complicity with this company and the lack of competition in granting contracts that make it so that a cafeteria spoon costs \$25. That's our tax money.

And it would be easy to rail against a Wal-Mart and its woeful record with regard to the way it treats its employees. And while we hope things are getting better, we really hope things are getting better; there is still a long way to go for the largest corporations in the world. It would be easy to rail against these. But again, it's always easier to confess another's sin than it is to confess our

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own. So let's bring commerce a little bit closer to home by considering how we and the people Israel have much in common.

The scripture that Molly read begins with the word "Ohhhhh." What are we to make of this? The people, Israel, in this portion of Isaiah, are in exile, in Babylon; and they are tempted in that moment to settle for the bread of Babylon. It is nothing fancy. And no, they have mostly lost their identity, their sense of nationhood, of peoplehood, their sense of their relationship with God. The covenant, it seems, has been broken because David and his dynasty have been destroyed; and the people are tempted to settle for what they do have.

"Well, no, we're not in the promised land. No, God's hand does not seem to be upon us. No, we are not living abundantly and in the way that we would like. But, at least we have something to eat. We don't have the work that is meaningful, but at least we feel like we are contributing something to the empire of which we are a part."

Into that context, God comes as a street vendor. Or even better, I imagine one of those snack vendors at Coors Field. You know them. They have that distinctive call, "Polish here. Polish. \$7.00 for a hot dog." And there is nothing else around to eat, so you pony up the \$7.00. And the malt guys competing with the Polish sausage guy, competing with the cotton candy woman and the beer lady.

In the midst of all that chatter, we hear a voice, and it starts out soft at first. "Ohhh, filet mignon. And it's free."

"What was that?"

"Fresh croissants. Put your wallet away."

"Fresh croissants."

"Fine wine. Crème Brulee. No, no, no, no. You keep your money."

That's what the God of Israel says to the people of Israel. That's what our God is saying to us.

And Pastor White, you were the one who taught us that the God of the Old Testament is not the vengeful God we were always taught, but a God of compassion and mercy. And you can hear it in God's question, "Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread and your labor for that which does not satisfy?" This is God calling us back home, back to that which may not be bought, which in the end is what ultimately matters. "Listen carefully to me," God says, "and eat what is good and delight yourselves in rich foods

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unless we think God is beckoning us to become gluttons, incline your ear.” That is the food. “And come to me.” “Listen so that you may live.”

That broken covenant, that sense that God has turned his or her back. Now God gives it not to one messianic figure but to the whole people, Israel. “I’m inviting you into covenant, to take that which gives life and to leave behind all that stuff that doesn’t matter. It’s just stuff.”

I love the bumper sticker – “The best things in life aren’t things.” We learn this, and we know it to be true, especially when we experience hardship – unemployment, a divorce, an illness. We realize that all that stuff that you spend so much energy trying to acquire, keep from getting broken, or keep it in tip top shape – it is really nothing next to the relationships, next to meaningful work, and next to a thriving community.

You see we suffer in our culture from – and I thank Darlene Avery for sharing this with the Confirmation class last weekend – the affliction of “afflu”-enza. And affluenza doubly tempts us. First of all, we are tempted to believe that that which we acquire, that which we consume, will give us happiness. And even when it does not, we all want more and think, “Well, if I just can get more, hold onto more, or make more money, I will then be happy.” But it never, ever works; and yet we keep on believing it.

But it’s a double temptation, because when we can finally convince ourselves that something needs to change, we make an outward change; and we forget that the change needs to happen within. We go through our closet, and we pull out all the clothes we have not worn in awhile. We put them in a bag, and we bring them down to Goodwill. Then we look in our closet, and it is a little less crowded, and we think, “Yeah. That’s right. I’m slimming down. I’m getting rid of the chaff.”

Or we make a subtle change here or there or maybe even a drastic change. But this is a temptation, because the change must happen within. All of that external either acquiring or convincing ourselves that we do not need it is all a sign that inside we are starving, starving for a relationship with one another and with the living God, whose food, whose word, whose message is worth more than all of the rest of it put together.

Is anyone listening? Do I have anybody here? Okay. I just need one witness, and that will be just fine.

We neglect the sanctuary within, the space that we know is there, and we have even visited it. In some ways, we have said it there. We have said, “Yeah, I’m going to spend some time there,” and then we don’t. We convince ourselves on

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a day-to-day basis that there are more important things. So we do not go there; we do not sit; we do not discern; we do not enjoy God's companionship.

Pastor Ryan, you have reminded us that God is a God of second, and more, chances. That sanctuary never falls in on itself. It never goes away. It is never not there. And we are never invited to sit and to be and to partake of the free meal that is offered there, that will not only fill us but will cause us to overflow.

I sense that church in your life today, as I mentioned, with the celebration, you cannot help but celebrate. You cannot but celebrate a retired minister return and his beautiful wife and our good friend into this community. You cannot help but celebrate the arrival of a new Associate Minister for Children Youth and Families and his wife, also a friend of ours, Alicia. You cannot help but celebrate birthdays and baptisms and lives passed of those of your beloved. And so you, along with the people Israel, have just the right ears to hear these words of Isaiah that he shares with them, after reminding them that the covenant is extended to them and to us.

For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return there until they have watered the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater. "So shall my word be that goes out from my mouth. It shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it. For you people, Israel, you church, shall go out in joy and be led back in peace. The mountains and the hills before you shall burst into song, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands. Instead of the thorn shall come up the cypress. Instead of the briar shall come up the myrtle, and it shall be to the Lord a memorial for an everlasting sign that shall not be cut off."

Amen.