

A MATTER OF PRINCIPLE

3) “That All Consuming Passion”

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I don't know about you, but I do my best to resist the great temptation of the “All You Can Eat Buffet.” Now, I grant you that in some cases the reasons for staying away may have more to do with the quality of the food than the quantity, but that is not always the case. You see, I have discovered something about myself that is not necessarily something that I am proud of and that is that I have a difficult maintaining a sense of discipline about what I eat and I how I eat when I know that there isn't an additional cost attached. Rather than be satisfied with a normal portion of food, I somehow feel that it is my duty to “take advantage” of the free return trip to the buffet table. And so it is that I sometimes find myself eating enough to cause a genuine sense of discomfort—and later regretting the experience. Does that sound familiar to any of you?

I am inclined to believe that this one example can provide more than a little insight not only about my nature, but human nature in general. For reasons that are not always clearly understood, we sometimes find ourselves consumed with consuming, that is, consuming much more than we need to in the hope of finding true satisfaction. Clearly there is something within us as human beings that is tempted to conclude that the more we have, the happier we will be. We are inclined to believe that if we just had a little bit more, then we would discover true happiness.

In our Gospel lesson from Luke, Jesus encounters a man who wants just a little bit more—or perhaps a lot more—from his brother in a dispute over their inheritance. It was the custom and law of the time that the first born male would receive twice as much in inheritance as the second born. Presuming that this man is second in the birth order, we can, at least, understand his complaint. No, it doesn't seem fair. But Jesus makes clear to the man that he wasn't really interested in providing arbitration for family disputes over who gets what. **Instead, he uses the man's request as an opportunity to talk about the larger issue of just where true security and true happiness are to be found.**

What follows is the parable of the rich fool which chronicle the rise and fall of a rich farmer whose crops were so great in their abundance that he faced the dilemma of what to do. After pondering the matter he decided that he would tear down his existing barns in order to barns big enough to store all of his grain. He would then, he concluded to himself, kick-back, relax, and eat, drink and be merry to his heart's content. While it sounded like a good retirement plan, it was not to be. That very night, Jesus informs his listeners, the man's life would come to an unexpected end and his vast holdings would no longer belong to him.

“So it is,” Jesus warns, **“with those who store up treasure for themselves, but are not rich toward God.”** The rich farmer had become the rich fool. You see, as the old saying goes, “you can’t take it with you.” This simple, yet powerful parable serves, this morning as the backdrop for our consideration of the United Methodist Social Principle that addresses the matter of consumption. This specific principle is provided on your bulletin insert. The opening paragraph provides a helpful overview:

“Consumers should exercise their economic power to encourage the manufacture of goods that are necessary and beneficial to humanity while avoiding the desecration of the environment in either production or consumption. Consumers should avoid purchasing products made in conditions where workers are being exploited because of their age, gender, or economic status.”

As we reflect upon our responsibility as consumers, key considerations are to be found in the two words, “necessary” and “beneficial.” How much of what we consume is indeed, **necessary**? And how much of it is **beneficial**? Our willingness to ask ourselves these two questions and honestly strive to answer them will go a long way toward shaping an ethic of responsible consumption.

The truth, of course, is that many people in our culture are not inclined to even ask these questions, let alone try to answer them honestly. Rather than concern themselves with what is necessary and beneficial, they would much rather focus on what is **desired**. If we are honest, we would have to admit that it is desire that is, more often than not, the true driver, the true engine of our economy. Now, to be sure, we don’t often speak of it in quite these terms, but that reality cannot be denied. Our desire is, more often than not, the driver.

In the years following the depression and then the devastation of World War II, Victor LeBeau, a research analyst gave voice to a premise that largely became the new economic mantra of our nation’s economic focus. This is what he wrote: ***“Our enormously productive economy...demands that we make consumption our way of life, that we convert the buying and use of goods into rituals; that we seek our spiritual satisfaction, our ego satisfaction in consumption...We need things consumed, burned up, replaced and discarded at an ever accelerating rate.”***

The vision of **Victor LeBeau**, it would appear, has, in fact, become our reality. We have indeed, made consumption our way of life, supported by the accompanying rituals that pursue spiritual and ego satisfaction in the purchase and consumption of more and more goods. The shopping mall has replaced the house of worship as the primary gathering place of our culture. In fact, I don’t think that it would be too much of a stretch to suggest that shopping and ever increasing consumption has become something of a religion for growing numbers of people. Clearly, it is, in the mind of some people, the antidote for unhappiness, depression and dis-satisfaction. The bumper sticker that suggests that **“When the going**

gets tough, the tough go shopping,” may be speaking more of the truth than we would like to admit.

In an era of “planned obsolescence” and “perceived obsolescence,” it is quite clear that we are doing a pretty good job of consuming, burning up, replacing and discarding things at an ever accelerating rate. It has been estimated that an average person is exposed to 3,000 ads a day. We see more ads in one year than people fifty years ago saw in their life time.

And are we happier for it? More satisfied as a result of all of our purchases? I think that you know the answer. As a recent poll cited in a Time Magazine article documents, our country is going through one its longest sustained periods of unhappiness and pessimism ever. There are, of course, many and varied reasons for this unhappiness, but it is quite apparent that our ability to purchase and consume more and more isn't having the effect that we might have hoped that it would.

Here is an intriguing fact: Our **national happiness index** peaked in the 1950's at roughly the same time our obsession with consumption was ramping up. Is that merely a coincidence? I'm inclined to think not. While we may have more stuff than ever before, we are having to work harder and longer to acquire it, leaving us with less and less leisure time to enjoy the things and the relationships that brings true meaning and joy to our lives.

The metaphor of a treadmill comes to mind—a treadmill that is slowly, but surely increasing in speed. As I look around these days, I see quite a number of tired, even exhausted people who would like to find a way to slow down the treadmill or, perhaps, get off it all together. But how is that possible? What steps can we take to slow things down?

While there are certainly no simple solutions or any quick fixes, our Social Principles remind us that ultimately, we have control over our own lives and what we choose to live for. While there is incredible pressure that our culture places upon us to keep up with escalating speed of the treadmill, we can make choices that are consistent with our values as followers of Jesus—values that respect the rights and dignity of others, values that hold sacred the earth and its finite resources, values that reflect the need for appropriate balance between work and play, labor and leisure.

But in order to make these choices, it is absolutely necessary to be clear about our own values and how we will choose to live in light of them. If we value what we desire over what we actually need, our luxury over what is actually necessary for a good life, the chances are that we will find ourselves up and running on that treadmill at an ever increasing speed. Oh, to be sure, we will complain about it to others and talk often about how hard we work, but the decision will be ours. This, however, is the choice we have made.

But, if we choose to take to heart the caution of Jesus that there is danger in storing up treasures for ourselves, but failing to be rich toward God, we will find ourselves living very differently—at a slower pace, a more measured pace, and yes, a more thoughtful pace. What might it mean for you and me to live lives that are “rich toward God?” How might this richness manifest itself?

In reflecting upon this teaching of Jesus in our Gospel lesson this morning, I am inclined to think that cultivating a “richness toward God” has to do with learning to place our fundamental trust in the provision of God. Now granted, that is easier said than done, but I believe that if we are really able to be clear with ourselves that what we ultimately need in order to experience the life that we long for has less to do with the quantity of “things” and more to do with the quality of our relationships—with God and others—we will have the foundation upon which we can build a life that knows deep satisfaction and true joy. This is indeed, the life we’ve always wanted.

Once we have gained the clarity we need in terms of our own values, we will then be able to make decisions about our consumption that are not contingent upon what we want or what we desire, but upon what is needed and what is beneficial not only for ourselves, but for others and for our planet.

When we buy coffee, will we choose to buy “Fair Trade” coffee that has made a fundamental commitment to ensure that the coffee growers and harvesters are paid a fair and just wage for their work? Or will we simply buy the coffee that we think tastes the best or is perhaps the cheapest to purchase?

When we purchase a car, will we take into consideration the fuel efficiency of the vehicle and the emissions rating that it has? Or, we will simply choose the car that affords the most luxury, comfort and prestige?

When we buy groceries, will we consider the impact of plastic upon our oceans and marine life? Or, will we simply opt for those products which are most convenient for our “on the go” life style?

These are, of course, but a few examples of the many choices that we are confronted with in the mix of the matrix that is our consumer culture. Are they easy choices to make? Not exactly! Are they important choices to make? Most assuredly! For they are choices that often do have a direct impact upon the welfare of others and upon the well being of our planet. Our Social Principles remind us that we have the opportunity and yes, the responsibility to make choices concerning **what we consume, how we consume and how much we consume**—choices that are reflective of the values and convictions that we hold.

In spite of what our culture may try to tell us, the good life that we long for is not to be found on the escalating treadmill of our insatiable desire for more. That leads only to exhaustion and disappointment. No, the good life that we seek is often found in the surprising discovery that less can be more; that by choosing to focus less upon the things that we want, and more upon that which we—and others—need, upon that which is truly beneficial, we will experience a richness toward God, toward one another, and toward our planet that satisfies our deepest longing for a life that truly matters. May it be so in your life and in mine. Amen.