

Money, money, money.

During tough times like the current economic recession, when the stock market seems to take yet another nosedive almost every day by the close of business what do we do?

Where do we turn when all we thought we had for sure disappears in an electronic flash?

Fiscally poor milkman, Tevye, the lead character in the musical *Fiddler on the Roof* laments his misfortune when his horse goes lame and he has to pull his milk cart himself.

He asks God what would it hurt if he were a rich man.

Yet, in spite of his aspirations for material wealth and more food than he has ever dreamed of for him and his family, he remains a faithful Jewish man.

After all the frivolity of wealth described in the song, the final verse hits the heart of his real desire.

He tells God that if he were rich, the gift is not so much the stuff he could buy, but the time he would have to spend in the synagogue in prayer and the study of Torah.

It is an interesting contrast to the modern business motto of “time is money”.

That being defined, of course, as the need to spend as much time as possible in pursuit of making more money. //

Since money seems to have been the headline news for the last two weeks at least, there is a sort of irony in the fact that this week’s Gospel reading also has Jesus talking about money – at least in a round about way.

I read and re-read this passage several times in the last couple of weeks to understand what else there was here that God might be much more interested in us grasping.

And then I saw something in this passage from Matthew’s Gospel that was truly sad.

Much sadder than the loss of any material thing could ever be, especially money.

It is this, that the Pharisees, lovers of God and the Law could hate one of their own – Jesus, to be specific -- as much as they evidently do in this passage and others from the Gospels.

If we look closely at the Gospel, Jesus and the Pharisees actually want the same thing, to grow and nurture faithful disciples of God;

to worship God; to study and understand Torah;

and to be in right relationship with God and with their neighbors.

Granted they do not agree entirely on how to achieve these goals, but they are all faithful Jews.

Yet the Pharisees are here plotting to entrap Jesus, knowing that the charge will be subject to the gravest penalty. //

A few weeks ago in our youth Christian formation class we asked everyone to name someone whom they would be surprised to see sitting in the chair next to them.

We were talking about who our neighbors are, trying to get a handle on those folks that we consciously and unconsciously dismiss or actively avoid, dislike, or sadly have come to hate.

It wasn't long before Osama Bin Laden's name was mentioned.

And yes, we would *all* have been extremely surprised to find that particular man sitting in a Christian Sunday school class in the U.S. of A.

I acknowledged that I would have had a really hard time staying in the room with this man.

My emotions are extremely complex on this point, almost certainly not fully informed, or even strictly speaking Christian in nature.

And it seems that when we let our emotions override the truth and knowledge of God's unbounded love that we get into trouble, just as the Pharisees did with Jesus.

We forget that God's love extends, surrounds, and embraces all people, not in a mushy emotional way, but in the beauty of God's holiness, where His love is inseparable from His justice and mercy and compassion. //

When the Pharisees try to trick Jesus on worldly matters – paying the poll tax to the Roman oppressors in this instance – Jesus' response amazes them.

He refocuses their line of sight back to God, saying "Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's."

This then is the crux of two important relational aspects of the lesson from this passage of Matthew.

The first is always our relationship to God and one another. The second is our relationship to money – one of the many things of the world that can trip us up, and become for us our own idol.

An idol is simply a replacement for the one, true God in our hearts and in our lives.

It also brings us to an important question for this evening, who or what is our real enemy?

For the Pharisees they clearly saw Jesus as the enemy, even as they lived under the terrible violence and oppression of the Roman Empire.

Is Osama Bin Laden our real enemy when we so obviously live under the oppressive burden of our material wealth, or the other gods of this world that still have a high place in our hearts? //

In one of Walt Kelly's Pogo cartoon strips he says, "We have met the enemy, and it is us."

How true are those words and how sad that the history of humanity is bursting at the seams with bewildering stories of betrayal and hatred against one another.

Indeed, it begs the question of what part of the command to 'love God and love our neighbor' do we have so much trouble living in to that we constantly turn on one another?

Sometimes the issue is purely about religiosity, often it is about money, territory or power, and frequently it seems to be a mixture of all these things.

At least in the sense that humankind seemingly cannot resist claiming the name of God to further our own warped desires, rather than humbly seeking God's will and serving our neighbors with the love and dignity that God accords to all people.

The great desert father and early ascetic, St. Gregory the Great, can still teach you and me another important lesson about who we are in Christ, and I quote.

“For to despise the present age,  
not to love transitory things,  
unreservedly to stretch out the mind in humility to God and  
our neighbor,  
to preserve patience against offered insults and,  
with patience guarded, to repel the pain of malice from the heart,  
to give one's property to the poor, not to covet that of others,  
to esteem the friend in God,  
on God's account to love even those who are hostile,  
to mourn at the affliction of a neighbor,  
not to exult in the death of one who is an enemy,  
this is the new creature whom the Master of the nations seeks with watchful  
eye amid the other disciples, saying:  
“If, then, any be in Christ a new creature, the old things are passed  
away. Behold all things are made new" (2 Corinthians 5:17). //

Tevye understood a little about what the stewardship of money.

In other words, what money might be able to do for him in terms of allowing him to spend more time praying and studying at synagogue.

Unfortunately, there isn't much in there about sharing the wealth with others.

So he didn't have it quite right either, not only in that respect, but he also forgot that time, as much as material wealth, is a gift from God.

This week I invite you to consider your own relationships with God, with God's family of humanity who are our neighbors far and near, and with money or whatever binds you from loving God with your whole heart, soul, and mind -- your own earthly idol.

Being a lover of God requires us to be honest with God and ourselves about our own shortcomings and the kind of worldly things that make us anxious.

Practicing God's graciousness requires us to be good stewards; humbly seeking God's will and serving God's call and great commandment.

Give therefore to God the things that are God's.

Much easier said than done, I think.

Amen.