

Title: Making Wise and Lasting Investments

Text: Luke 12:13-21

Place and date: Mayflower UCC, July 28, 2019

Good morning! This morning I'm going to talk about making wise, long term, and lasting investments and increasing your net worth.

Oops, wait a minute! Who is he to talk about investments? How can he talk about wise investments? Does he have a brokerage license to talk about that subject? Is he not a theologian? Would you trust a theologian to give you advice on investment? If you would give me a chance you may all be broke in a month's time.

If you have difficulty trusting me as your investment advisor, there is one that I'm highly recommending. His name is Jesus Christ.

Would you trust Jesus as your investment advisor? Would you trust Jesus your investment portfolio? Would you go to the Jesus Christ Brokerage instead of Ameritrade or Schwab? Why not? You have heard time and again that "Jesus Saves." And, if Jesus saves, you want to know where he shops.

What would Jesus' investment advice be? Would he recommend aggressive funds? Or, limit you to blue chips? How much exposure in international funds would he recommend? Which sector of the economy would he want you to focus on?

What would his investment advice be? Now, brace yourself.

"Why all this concern about investment and savings? You could die this very night. Who will enjoy them? You fool." Ouch!

This is like someone receiving a birthday card on his birthday. With excitement, he opened the envelope. Then he read the message carefully. It says, "See you soon." Sign: "God."

Whether we like it or not, death is going to make generous givers of us all. Everything we own will pass on to others.

Then Jesus continues his advice. "Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; *for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.*" (12:15)

Jesus' advice is shocking! Rather than telling us how to generate more value for our financial portfolio, he goes right away into the heart of the matter: our

religious and moral orientation. How do we see ourselves in relation to resources or material things? How do we measure success?

Our answer to these questions will shape our attitude and relationship to wealth and other goods. It will set the direction of our lives and priorities. It will inform how we value our lives, our net worth, and the standards by which we measure success. It will inform how we relate to the world around us, our neighbors, and of creation.

Let's make our orientation and direction right. It's not wrong to have the resources that we need; and there is no virtue in being poor as such.

The question is, what sets the orientation or compass of our lives? If, according to an ad from an electric company, making a *dig* mistake could be a *big* mistake, I say that making a life-priority mistake is a big mistake with eternal consequences.

This big and lethal mistake is to fall into what the Christian tradition calls idolatry. What is idolatry?

In any expression of idolatry, a fundamental confusion is involved. To appropriate a popular analogy from the Buddhist tradition: It is like confusing the finger pointing to the moon with the moon itself, or confusing the raft with the shore. If you focus and get fixated on the finger you might miss the moon and you might be led to think that your finger is the moon. Similarly, if you get fixated on the raft, you might miss the shore, and be led to think that the raft is the shore.

When we give ultimate status to something not ultimate, idolatry happens. When we give mundane goods the status of eternal securer idolatry happens. Putting our *trust* upon transient goods to secure our future and close all possible windows of vulnerability is to fall into idolatry. These mundane goods that are made into eternal securers could be wealth, nation, family, guns, education, etc.

Mundane goods are great to have. We need them. We need resources for our sustenance and to enhance the quality of our lives. Bread is something that we cannot do without. For those who are hungry, God is bread. God must become bread if the Gospel is to be good news to those who are hungry.

Yet, even as God is bread, bread is not God. To do so is to make bread God; it is to fall into idolatry. It is to allow bread to lord over us. It is to make it the ultimate measurement of our lives—the measurement of success. It is no wonder that the same Jesus who taught us to pray for our daily bread is the same Jesus who said, you should not live by bread alone.

In an oppressive and exploitative world the fundamental enemy of evangelization is not atheism, but idolatry. Why?

Atheism does not demand sacrifice; idolatry does. Idolatry sucks the blood of the people, particularly the common workers, to offer to the altar of the supreme god—PROFIT.

Idolatry is pervasive. Even self-proclaimed atheists are not free from grip of idols. The secular world is full of gods that demand ultimate allegiance. The nation-state, the market, and malls are as just as religiously infested as the church, and may even be more so in many instances.

Even at the level of words and meanings (semantics) there are obvious correlations: Both fields regularly employ such words as *trust, fidelity, bond, confidence, fiduciary, debt, redemption, saving, security, and futures*.

If the fear of God is the beginning of wisdom, the fear for our security is the beginning of idolatry. Idolatry is nourished and driven by fear: fear for security, fear of scarcity, and fear of the other. Fear feeds idolatry; idolatry stokes fears.

One does not have to look personally greedy. In fact, one can be more generous; one can be a philanthropist. Yes, you don't have to look greedy; you just let the system do it for you. When you do it, you would look great. You're simply an investment savvy. You can support the bombing of enemy territories in the morning, give to charities at noon, and reap honorary awards in the evening. You may get featured in the Evening News, which normally starts with Good Evening, and everything thereafter is bad news.

Idolatry not only leads to greed because of the perception of scarcity, it also fears the other. Feeling the threat of a shrinking pie and the threat of expanding multicultural diversity that could alter white dominance, opportunist politicians and

elites stoke fears on the populace, many of whom have been disenfranchised by the system, unleashing hate and shouting, “send them back to where they came from!”

If it is true that love has the power to cast out fear; it is equally true that fear has the power to cast out love (I John 4:18). Fear turns us into egocentric monsters, unable to feel the needs of others.

There is not enough space, not enough pie. We cannot accept them anymore. Close the doors; build more walls; secure our borders. Send them away! Now!

I could see the river of tears flowing on Maria’s face and hear her pleading voice as she was holding her five-year old daughter Ana. They were at the U.S. southern border trying to flee violence and death from El Salvador. But, when they arrived at the border, the border guards told them that the U.S. is closed to refugees, and that they must go back to El Salvador. Going back could mean death, while staying means imprisonment for Maria and separation from her daughter Ana. What’s the choice? *Entre la espada y la pared*. This is a choice between a sword and a wall, a rock and a hard place, the devil and the deep blue sea.

This reminded me of a learning moment while I was sitting on the beach in Tampa, Florida, after I delivered a sermon during Mike McMellan’s installation, who once served here at Mayflower. A dragonfly landed on my shoulder. I cannot recall the details, but I made the gesture to make it fly away. When the dragonfly was about two meters away a black bird swooped, snatched the dragonfly, and had it for a meal. I was startled and couldn’t believe what I just saw. O my gush, I just sent the dragonfly to the death row...to its predator.

Even in the midst of plenty, when a people succumbs to idolatry, which sees the world from the point of view of scarcity, it cannot imagine opening its heart and extending its hands to save the lives of those who are fleeing death. Idolatry constricts the heart and shrinks moral imagination. This is tragic. I recall a television series, Mary-Kate and Ashley Olsen, in which one of the twin sisters asked: “Dad, dad, why is it that when people get older their imagination gets smaller.” “The most tragic form of loss isn’t the loss of security,” says Ernst Bloch, “it’s the loss of the capacity to imagine that things could be different.” And, following Mark Twain, “You cannot depend on your eyes when your imagination is out of focus.”

The idols of death must be smashed, if we are to restore our ability to imagine a different world, if we are to imagine a healthy, hospitable, and loving way of living. We must expose, exorcise, and resist the idols of death and various forms of greed of our times. In the face of the idols of death of our time, following Ernst Bloch again, “only an atheist can be a good Christian; only a Christian can be a good atheist.” We have to be atheists in the face of the idols of death of our time.

When we are liberated from the grip of idolatry, our moral imagination expands and our life’s priorities fall in their proper place, and we discover what truly matters and the standards by which we measure our lives, our achievements, and our significance, which is not the same with fame. If the world measures and defines success based on the abundance of our possessions, the parable of reversal says that our true measure or net worth is not in the abundance of possessions, but in our investments in goods or values that truly last wherever we are and whatever situation we are in. The only goods that are of lasting value, says an ancient wisdom, are those that cannot be lost in a shipwreck. These are the goods that we must invest: works of love, truth, justice, mercy, and compassion. These are the goods that promote greater wellbeing. And, because we know that wellbeing is not defined by wealth, we can *hold all things lightly*: owning without treasuring, and possessing without being possessed.

Do you want to secure your future? If so, invest in something that last and those that cannot be lost in a shipwreck. Do you want to find your true net worth and get the high credit score that truly matters? If so, seek the investment advice of Jesus and follow the Jesus path! Thank you.