

Wisdom and Finance
Rev. William B. Montgomery II
Trinity United Methodist Church
September 20, 2009

I am sure we have been in situations where all seemed dark and bleak, or the news we heard was filled with words of despair and the forecast was certainly anything but sunny skies and low humidity. In such times, it is easy to get down and stay in the dumps. In such times it is common to want to pull the sheet over our head, get in fetal position and have a good cry. Even the most optimistic of us have those times. Even the most spirit-filled people of faith will have those moments when the hand that has been dealt doesn't seem worth playing.

I knew a person who in such times would say, "Where is the garden spot?" There has to be a garden spot; there is always one. No matter how bad things seem, there is always a garden spot. Sometimes it takes a great search and sometimes a painful search to find it, but there is always a garden spot. Such a belief, such an understanding that with God all things are possible, helped in some pretty difficult and challenging times for him.

For almost two years now we have been experiencing the downside in our economy. A great big cloud has moved in over us. Many have lost jobs though thankfully in Virginia the unemployment is not as bad as in other parts of our country. Still, the words we hear on the nightly news and the articles we read in the morning paper are rather bleak. When the forecast is dark, when the financial world is unstable, there has to be a garden spot—more commonly called a silver lining. Sometimes it takes a while to see it, especially when we have been so deeply affected by it as we count our loses, postpone retirement or keep living in a house that we bought five years ago and can't afford to sell at the current going rate.

We've been under a dark economic cloud that keeps hovering over us like a bad storm that just kind of stays situated over a certain area dumping rain and dampening moods. Mike Slaughter in his book *Upside Living in a Downside Economy* writes that the silver lining in this dark economic cloud is that "economic challenges cause us to re-examine our financial priorities and practices. You might say that they cause us to

evaluate our priorities and rebalance our life investments. If we're willing, hard times help us figure out what is really important in all of life and how to invest more wisely in our relationships, vocation, and God-purpose, as well as our finances." [Slaughter, p. 27]

In order for us to see the garden spot in all of this or to catch a glimpse of the silver lining, we need not look in the newspaper or watch the news to hear of an economic recovery nor do we need to look at our quarterly investment reports to see that this quarter is fairing better than the last. Instead, we need to look within to do an honest evaluation and also look to God to discover growth, to rediscover what is truly important in life and with such changes to begin to see the ever-widening silver lining.

The aim of this series on finances is to offer biblical wisdom and practical tools to help each of us see more and more of the silver lining in the midst of this dark, looming economic cloud. For us to see it requires a commitment on our part to make such changes and to realign our lives with the purposes of God. This cutting away or giving up of certain things that we enjoy, this realignment can be painful and at times humbling, but I would rather be humbled by this current economy than to continue to be hurt by it. I would rather be all the wiser with the lessons learned than to continue to play the part of the fool by putting more on credit cards, living beyond my means and thinking that my life and economic situation will get better when the economy turns around with little or no changes on my part.

Chances are that at some point in our lives we have been rather foolish with our finances either in the value we have placed on the dollar, our pursuit of wealth, the accumulation of debt as we live beyond our means or simply in blowing what we have earned. When we look at the story of the prodigal son, we have been conditioned to see a person who left and came home after spending his inheritance, and we see it as a great story of grace. It is a story of grace as the father welcomes home the son and throws a party at his return. We are blown away by this incredible measure of grace and we say, "This is how God is ready and willing to receive us. Those who have sinned, who were away from God are welcomed home and given a second chance in life." But before we get to the story of God's redeeming grace, it is a story of a son who blew everything he had in living for today instead of building a future.

Here is a young man who lived only for the present, seeking instant gratification and in so doing, took all that he had and “squandered it in dissolute living.” [Luke 15:13] Adam Hamilton in his book *Enough* reminds us that “prodigal does not mean one who wanders away or is lost, [rather a] prodigal literally means “one who wastes money.” [Hamilton, p. 31] There are a great many prodigals in America. Sure, there are many people who are away from God, but there are many who are very close to God, who worship God yet are prodigals because they live for today, seeking the comfortable life of pleasure, spending and blowing money today instead of being good stewards of one’s resources by spending appropriately and at the same time thinking about the future. There are many prodigals who haven’t wandered away from the church but are in church, who love God and seek to worship God but don’t follow God’s directives when it comes to tithes and offerings and going into debt. In the parable of the prodigal son, there is a bailout plan in the story. It is a story of a father’s love who welcomes home the prodigal with a robe, a ring, sandals and a feast. The problem with real life twenty-first Century prodigal sons and daughters living in America is that we go about our living, spending our resources and living and acting in such a way that when there is a downside, when we hit rock bottom or there is a famine in the land, we want a bailout or a quick fix instead of doing some soul searching and making necessary changes in life. We want a miracle—a God-sized bailout.

Some of those changes that we can make are not so difficult and some are. We can see the benefits of the changes within a month. Adam Hamilton suggests that there are two ways we so easily waste money, and if we can make a few simple changes and adopt a few rules to live by we wouldn’t spend money just because we have the money to spend or the credit to purchase. The first is “impulse buying.” [Hamilton, p. 34] We see something on sale and we have to have it. We never would have bought it had it not been on sale, but now that it is on sale we have a need for it. To overcome this impulse, we should create a list when we go to the grocery store or to the mall and buy only things on the list. There are numerous times I have gone to the grocery store to pick up a few items but left the store with many items. It’s amazing how often a \$20 grocery store run turns into \$40. This could be eliminated by writing things down on paper and sticking to the list as well as not going to the grocery store when one is hungry. Another way to kick the

impulse buying habit is to wait twenty-four hours before purchasing something that you have seen in a store or saw in an advertisement. Sometimes waiting to purchase an item means not purchasing the item we thought for a moment that we could not live without.

The second biggest money waster, according to Adam Hamilton, is eating out. The average American will eat out four times a week. If a family of four were to eat out four times a week and for fifty-two weeks they would spend \$10,000 or more on eating out in a given year. Reducing this to eating out once a week and eating the same kind of food at home would be a savings of close to \$4,000 in a year. We could reduce debt with that kind of savings; we could get a good start on a down payment for a house with that kind of savings; we could go on a nice vacation with that kind of savings; we could give more to God and to God's purposes with that kind of responsible living. [Hamilton, p. 36]

When I read these two resources by Mike Slaughter and Adam Hamilton back in May and started adopting the principles and practical rules, I realized my family and I could make some lifestyle changes. We cut out our cable, dropped satellite radio and stopped using the gym for three months. I miss the occasional game on television, but I don't miss the twenty-four hour news agencies clouding my perception of doom and gloom nor do I miss the \$75 cable bill. Though I love to play golf I cut out playing with any kind of regularity and I was able to take such savings and apply to a vacation with the kids. The month of July and most of August, we didn't visit a single fast food restaurant until our trip to Florida, and in those six weeks we may have eaten out three times. We saved a great deal. I have made shopping lists and have stuck to the lists and passed on the goodies that were just screaming at me to be eaten in the parking lot, and the 'Hot Donuts' sign in this same time period had no effect on me.

We can all find ways to cut wasteful spending, and over time we will have more money to reduce debt, to save and to give away. Whether we are struggling to make ends meet or making a good amount of money only to be wasting it away, making such changes can be beneficial not only for our financial well-being but in other areas of life as well. I realize we are not in the season of Lent, but what is the one thing that you could give up that over time would save hundreds of dollars that could go toward removing personal debt or increase savings or giving?

We know that there are areas in our lives that need changing, but putting such knowledge into practice doesn't always happen. We go to the doctor and the doctor tells us what we need to do to be healthier. So we know what to do, what changes need to be made, but we don't always follow through with a plan. Some people are more apt to change a doctor because they didn't like what they heard than to make a lifestyle change. Some people are more apt to change a church because they want a feel good religion than to hear about repentance or how we need to make lifestyle changes so that we are not only worshiping God but following God's directives in regards to areas of finance, stewardship and personal relationships.

We want to live as Christians but we find it difficult to do so in many ways in our culture because we are so easily influenced by consumerism and materialism. We want to live as Christians as we say we have a love for Jesus, but we don't always follow in the ways of Christ. Many Christians find themselves with one foot in the boat of materialism and the other foot in the boat called kingdom living. These boats are not always side by side; in fact, many times they are going in two different directions putting strain on the person who has one foot in each boat. We feel this strain a great deal throughout the year, but especially during the season of Christmas when we enjoy the American Christmas experience and seek to honor Christ in a sacred and meaningful way. With two legs in two different boats, we know how this story ends—the person falls between the two boats that are drifting away from each other. The person eventually goes to one of the two boats and most get into the boat of hedonism or materialism while at the same time proclaiming a love for Jesus.

Mike Slaughter writes about these two competing worldviews and our desire to hold these views together. The first worldview was described by Aristippus, a student of Socrates, who in the fifth and fourth centuries B. C. stated that many live with the philosophy that we are to pursue pleasure and this pleasure that we seek is the only reason we work. The goal with this worldview is to gain and experience as much pleasure as we can and at the same time minimize pain and suffering. Mike Slaughter writes, "It is a worldview that places self and self's wants at the center. I determine my own priorities, my own values, my own wants, and my own direction; I do what I want, I

go where I want, and I buy what I want. If there's anything left over, I may give some to God and others." [Slaughter, p. 31]

We who have said "yes" to Christ, struggle with following after Christ in a consumer driven society. God wants more than our lip service. God desires that we don't just say that we love Christ but that we serve him with a life of commitment. This is what our "yes" at our baptism is really all about. It is not a "yes, I love you Lord" and "yes, I know you sent Jesus Christ to redeem my life," but a "yes, I will follow in your ways," "yes, I will go where you lead" and "yes, I will do as you direct." In saying "yes" to Christ we are saying "no" to the ways of the world, and the ways of the world are so enticing as we are tempted to seek instant gratification, tempted to believe that because God's will for us is wholeness and peace that we can get there with a miraculous bailout plan from God, from a wealthy relative or a mega millions lottery ticket.

Many Christians live with the belief that God only cares about our spiritual lives and our physical health. Yet, God cares deeply about every aspect of our lives. If we are not financially healthy this puts a great strain on us. Many keep up outside appearances that all is well—not changing spending habits, and the credit card balances keep getting higher. More marriages end in divorce, not because of adultery or the death of a child, but over matters of finances—how money is handled, who spends it or financial secrets kept from each other. The main reason for this is there are no goals, no plan, and no budget.

Perhaps you are familiar with the saying: "If you fail to have a plan then you plan to fail." Included in today's bulletin is an insert. One page is on setting goals and the other is a suggested budget used by Christian financial advisor David Ramsey. I hope that you will spend time this week thinking about life and financial goals. Write them down; talk about them with others. Use this budget as a means to see just where all of your money after taxes is going. There might be some surprises. Where can we spend more; how can we spend less? Where our money goes could very well determine where our priorities lie. If we find that we are spending way too much on food or transportation we might need to make some changes to either live within our means or at least more responsibly.

Sometimes these decisions are painful and we will miss some of what we give up. For two months I had to hear complaints about not being able to see the Disney Channel or NASCAR on ESPN, and in about three months when college basketball is aired on

ESPN my family may hear me complaining. But I didn't hear the complaints when we were able to go on vacation with money saved from making some changes in our spending. Just because we can have certain things, or think we need certain things, doesn't mean we have to have them. Our culture says "go after it, you deserve it, buy it now and pay for it later. Pamper yourself, keep up good appearances." The prodigal in us wants it all, seeking pleasures now instead of waiting it out and being good stewards of what is entrusted to us.

I will close by referencing the Six Principles that Adam Hamilton offers in the book *Enough*. A copy of these Six Principles is included in each bulletin. This should be placed where you need it the most. For some, it will be next to the computer screen as many do a great deal of on line banking and buying on the internet. For others, it needs to be taped to the refrigerator. Still others might need to place it on the dash of the car, tape it to the sun visor mirror or keep it on the desk where all of the bills are paid.

First, pay your tithe and offering. God deserves more than the 2.2 % that most Christians give.

Second, create a budget and track your expenses. Budgets are not just for those on a fixed income but are for everyone. Tracking our expenses enables us to see just where we might be wasting money.

Third, simplify your lifestyle. In other words, live below your means. If your debt is more than it was last year and the year before that you are going in the wrong direction. It's time to get out of the boat of materialism.

Fourth, establish an emergency fund so that when the unexpected comes you can pay cash and not put everything on a credit card.

Fifth, pay off your credit card, use cash/debit cards for purchases. I can remember as a child hearing that my dad put a freeze on his credit cards. I figured that he worked something out with the credit card company that no more purchases could be made for a few months. No, he actually put them in a small plastic bag, placed this bag in a much larger one filled it with water and put it in the freezer. If he needed something that desperately, he would have to wait for it to thaw.

Sixth, practice long term savings and investing habits. Put into practice delayed gratification when it comes to large purchases like a motorcycle or camper, waiting to pay cash as opposed to taking out long term high interest loans.

If we can adopt these Six Principles, over a period of months and years, the silver lining in the midst of a dark economic cloud will seem more like a brightly colored rainbow that appears when the sun breaks through the dark clouds. Just because the economy is on the downside doesn't mean we have to stay there.

Resources:

Hamilton, Adam. *Enough: Discovering Joy Through Simplicity and Generosity*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2009, 29-51.

Slaughter, Mike. *Upside Living in a Downside Economy*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2009, 27-49.