

**“Rejoice in the Lord Always...Really?”**

Bear Stearns, Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac, Lehman Brothers, AIG, Washington Mutual, Wachovia: a year ago these names would have evoked financial strength and security. Today, they are the names most associated with our nation’s economic crisis. As Washington and Wall Street have scurried to respond, there has been no shortage of blaming. Some blame executives and investors who allowed greed to overtake better judgment; others are quick to accuse politicians for allowing companies to run wild and failing to hold them accountable; still others point the finger at people who borrowed above their means or at creditors who didn’t verify income. I know you have heard all of this already. But did you read the *Time Magazine* article entitled, “Maybe We Should Blame God for the Subprime Mess.” Yep, that’s right, not even God Almighty is coming out of all of this unscathed!

In truth, the article does not really blame God. More accurately, it asks the provocative question, could our theology be to blame for our economic irresponsibility, in particular a brand of theology that has become widely known as the prosperity gospel? Even if you don’t know what the prosperity gospel is per se, I can almost guarantee that you have heard it. Perhaps you have heard of Joel Osteen. I would not be surprised if you have seen him on TV and even thought to yourself, this guy is pretty good. Well, he is good. He is handsome, well dressed, well spoken and likeable. And his most powerful tool is that he tells us what we want to hear in the name of the Gospel.

The basic theology of prosperity gospel goes like this, “God wants to bless you with wealth and prosperity, so if you turn your life over to God, then God will show you favor and this favor will result in more money in your bank account. Why will God do this? Well, God wants us to be happy, of course, and what makes us happier than money. Plus, once you are rich, God will use you and your fabulous lifestyle to attract more followers.” The *Time* article sites preachers such as Osteen and many others who equate financial prosperity with God’s favor. Some preachers have even encouraged listeners to forget their past, including their credit history: “Even if you have a poor credit rating, God can still bless you,” they say. “If God wants to bless you, God will bless you.” And so when creditors were willing to overlook poor credit, some sited divine intervention. “God made them turn a blind eye. God wants me to buy that house, get a new car and dress in nice clothes.”

People want to believe in a God who loves them and wants what is best for them. People also desire financial security and the ability to enjoy life. Neither of these are bad things, of course. And a theology that can link the two is surely powerfully attractive. The problem is that this particular theology plays upon a mistaken understanding of blessing, one that many of us actually share, and that is equating God’s favor with blessing and blessing with prosperity. Blessing, in the biblical sense, is not primarily about our own prosperity. A blessing is a gift from God, to be used to benefit others. It is not so much a sign of God’s favor for us as it is of God’s calling on us and favor on all. And so this idea of God granting prosperity to show favor, while appealing, actually reverses Jesus’ own version of how God’s favor relates to prosperity. The Gospel is clear as clear can be: God favors the poor and oppressed. Is

there one example in the Gospels of Jesus encouraging his disciples to gather up possessions and wealth? No, he instructed his disciples to give away their possessions and learn to rely on God and neighbor for even the most basic necessities of food and shelter. There is no question of God's presence with the poor and needy according to Jesus. What is in question is if those of us who have wealth and possessions are able to understand our need to trust in God above our own means?

One theologian puts it this way: "God's love does not seek value, it creates value. It is not because we have value that we are loved, but because we are loved that we have value. Our value is a gift, not an achievement." (William Sloan Coffin, *Credo*). Nor I would add is our value in God's eyes equated with our net worth. You and I might be able to look on something like this prosperity gospel and see its obvious flaws, but if we do that we should also be willing to examine just how much trust we place in our own ability to earn our value.

What a different picture Paul portrays in the passage we read today from his letter to the Philippians! "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice." It is important to remember, as I have pointed out over the past couple Sundays as we have been attending to this letter to the Philippians, that theirs' was a community in distress. Internal and external turmoil were creating a crisis of faith for many in the community. Things were not going well ever since Paul's last visit and I am sure that many wondered if they had fallen out of God's favor. For surely, hardship is not what God has in mind for God's chosen ones.

It is important to remember this context as I say, because otherwise we might dismiss Paul's words here as naïve optimism; something along the lines of the song *Always Look on the Bright Side of Your Life*. If we do that, we are missing the point, I think. This is more than looking at the glass half full as opposed to half empty. It is about claiming our God given value and learning to hold onto it in all circumstances. In all circumstances? Really? What about when things are not going well for us? What about when things are not going our way? Yes, even when things are not really going our way, Paul says. Because even then, and perhaps especially then, we need reminding that God stands with us no matter what. And so Paul writes, "Stand firm in the Lord...Don't worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving make your requests be made known to God."

But I want to be very clear here. Just as there is a danger of too closely associating God's blessings with our own success, there are some dangers in how we apply Paul's message as well. There is the temptation to say that we just have to muddle through this life, that we will receive our reward in heaven. Or there is the danger of communicating that God does not take our struggles seriously. Paul is not suggesting either of those here. His intention is not to minimize the hardships that the community in Philippi is facing, nor do I intend to minimize the seriousness of our current economic situation. People are hurting and scared. People are anxious about their retirement and savings. Some of you may be a bit anxious about what will happen to job security in the future if this economic down turn doesn't reverse soon. Many are worried about losing their homes. This is real stuff and many have a good reason to worry. Simply saying, "Don't worry about it" is not going to cover it. The

admonition to have faith is not enough. Have faith in what? Have faith in whom? As I said, this is not about whether we are pessimistic or optimistic.

On the bulletin cover is a quote from Albert Einstein, "There are only two ways to live your life. One is as though nothing is a miracle. The other is as though everything is a miracle." Take note: Einstein is not talking about how we view life, but how we live it. We're not always going to feel good about our circumstances. That's perfectly OK. Yet, we can still recognize that our circumstances do not define us. Another author puts it this way, "See [your life] for the fathomless mystery that it is. In the boredom and pain of it no less than in the excitement and gladness: touch, taste, smell your way to the holy and hidden heart of it because in the last analysis all moments are key moments, and life itself is grace" (Frederick Buechner).

You see what we sometimes forget, the mistake we too often make, and it is to our own deficit, is that our value is all about what we can hold on to, but the truth, the truth is that our value is a gift from the one who holds on to us throughout all circumstances of our lives, through all of the ups and downs.

Let us pray: Gracious God, there are times when we worry that we won't have enough and when our best efforts won't be enough. Help us to trust you in all circumstances and never to fall into the trap of mistaking our net worth with our value in your site or thinking that your blessings are meant to be held on to rather than shared, just as you have shared your grace with us, through Christ our Lord. Amen.