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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY  
3/4/2009, The First Week of Lent, Midweek  
Avarice

## APOSTOLIC GREETING

### PRAYER OF THE DAY

Lord God, our strength, the battle of good and evil rages within and around us, and our ancient foe tempts us with his deceits and empty promises. Keep us steadfast in your Word and, when we fall, raise us again and restore us through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen**

### SECOND LESSON..... Acts 16:16-34, RSV

<sup>16</sup>As we were going to the place of prayer, we were met by a slave girl who had a spirit of divination and brought her owners much gain by soothsaying. <sup>17</sup>She followed Paul and us, crying, "These men are servants of the Most High God, who proclaim to you the way of salvation." <sup>18</sup>And this she did for many days. But Paul was annoyed, and turned and said to the spirit, "I charge you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her." And it came out that very hour. <sup>19</sup>But when her owners saw that their hope of gain was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the market place before the rulers; <sup>20</sup>and when they had brought them to the magistrates they said, "These men are Jews and they are disturbing our city. <sup>21</sup>They advocate customs which it is not lawful for us Romans to accept or practice." <sup>22</sup>The crowd joined in attacking them; and the magistrates tore the garments off them and gave orders to beat them with rods. <sup>23</sup>And when they had inflicted many blows upon them, they threw them into prison, charging the jailer to keep them safely. <sup>24</sup>Having received this charge, he put them into the inner prison and fastened their feet in the stocks. <sup>25</sup>But about midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them, <sup>26</sup>and suddenly there was a great earthquake, so that the foundations of the prison were shaken; and immediately all the doors were opened and every one's fetters were unfastened. <sup>27</sup>When the jailer woke and saw that the prison doors were open, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself, supposing that the prisoners had escaped. <sup>28</sup>But Paul cried with a loud voice, "Do not harm yourself, for we are all here." <sup>29</sup>And he called for lights and rushed in, and trembling with fear he fell down before Paul and Silas, <sup>30</sup>and brought them out and said, "Men, what must I do to be saved?" <sup>31</sup>And they said, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household." <sup>32</sup>And they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all that were

in his house. <sup>33</sup>And he took them the same hour of the night, and washed their wounds, and he was baptized at once, with all his family. <sup>34</sup>Then he brought them up into his house, and set food before them; and he rejoiced with all his household that he had believed in God.

HOLY GOSPEL ..... Matthew 6:19-21, RSV

<sup>19</sup>Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; <sup>20</sup>but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. <sup>21</sup>For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

HYMN LBW 410

*We Give Thee but Thine Own*

HEATH

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

But when her owners saw that their hope of gain was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the market place before the rulers; (Acts 16:19, RSV)

In speaking of greed, I think there is profit for our souls in setting aside the robber baron and focusing instead on the common man, the common woman, indeed, even the poor man or woman. It is easy enough to see that there is something wrong with the captain of industry who is so set on amassing wealth that he does not hesitate to use unfair business practices or to run roughshod over his employees or competitors. The more interesting case is the ordinary man or woman who is not notorious for wealth or cruelty, but who nonetheless has become preoccupied with money. It dominates his mind too much; it distracts her from peace and virtue.

Let us imagine, then, the slave owners in this evening's story to be fairly ordinary men. It takes quite an effort of imagination, I know, to picture them that way, for they participate in an abomination - slavery. But, then, they were creatures of their times, and perhaps we should not condemn them for being unable to transcend their times. The laws were on their side. It was not unheard of back then that one human being could pretend to own another. To us, it is an outrageous thought! Why, we do not even own ourselves, but have our very lives entrusted to us by our Maker. How could any of us imagine that we could own a fellow human being? Still, the laws of the Roman Empire permitted slavery, and so the slaver owners in this story could comfort themselves that they were law-abiding folk, trying to make their way in a tough world.

Let us picture them as small businessmen with families to take care of. If they lose this girl, they imagine themselves to be in trouble. How are they going

to put bread on the table for their wives and little ones? Let us suppose that they have had a stretch of hard times recently. One of the children, let us say, has been very sick. The doctor bills have piled up, and it seems useless, for the child remains ill. We could imagine a thousand circumstances that might have left the slave owners on the borderlines of poverty. Let's imagine them so.

They have a kind of circus act going for them. They have a slave girl who has a demonic spirit which permits her to cry out some *true* things. Indeed, the things she cries out concerning the apostles Paul and Silas are so true that her owners would have done well to heed her:

“These men are servants of the Most High God, who proclaim to you the way of salvation.”(Acts 16:17, RSV)

But the problem is, they *cannot* heed her, for they are under the spell of avarice. This girl brings them “much gain” by soothsaying. They have become so accustomed to the money she brings them that they no longer have pity for her poor estate, for she is doubly cursed: once, to be a slave, and twice to be haunted by a demon. But the slave owners have gotten so much in the rhythm of thinking of money, that they can hardly imagine life without this girl's misery, and they have lost the ability to rejoice for the girl when St. Paul casts out that demon.

St. John Chrysostom has a striking description of avarice, lifting up the power of greed to numb the conscience:

Those who love money are fierce in the pursuit of it, like wild animals pursuing their prey. They do not allow the ties of friendship to restrain them; they betray, cheat, or exploit their closest friends when there is gold and silver to be gained. Nor do they let the chains of conscience inhibit them; they learn to make their consciences as numb as fingers on a cold day.<sup>1</sup>

There's a good image for us on this wintry evening: “they learn to make their consciences as numb as fingers on a cold day.”

Jesus teaches us to store up for ourselves treasures *in heaven*, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. This means that treasures *on earth* should not so dominate our lives that we would gain the whole world, but lose our souls. Rather, we should so live this present life with goodness towards others and with virtue in our hearts that we will

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<sup>1</sup> *On Living Simply: The Golden Voice of John Chrysostom*, Compiled by Robert Van de Weyer (Liguori, Missouri: Triumph Books, 1996), page 22.

have accumulated treasures in heaven. Let us strive that we not have to stand shamefaced before the Lord, having little to point to by way of love for others.

And this appeal to get the love of money under control is an appeal that applies to everyone who would follow Jesus, from the rich to the poor, from the well-settled to the anxious.

Back in the 1970s, there was a western-of-sorts called “Kung Fu.” It was about a Shaolin monk named Kwai Chang Caine, played by David Carradine. Many scenes from that series have remained in my memory. One of them that haunts me to this day concerns the economy. As I recall the scene, Caine requests food from some poor working men. Maybe they are miners, I do not quite remember. In any case, they ask him what he will give them in return for the food. He answers, “My labor.” You would think that would be a good answer, but the workers simply sigh and say, “Labor? That’s all we have, labor!” But in pity on the stranger, the miners give Caine some food anyway.

You see, Caine had stumbled upon a world in which his labor could hardly count. There was *so much* labor to be done that his contribution could barely lift the load at all. It would be like trying to empty the ocean with a spoon.

It troubled me back then to imagine such a thing: that you could have someone willing to work, but unable to make a living through that work.

I fear we have lived to see such troubling economic days. We have people willing to work, but we do not have enough jobs for them to do. We have college graduates with mountains of college or professional school debt behind them, but with too few jobs to support them. Our situation is the reverse of that scene with the Shaolin monk, but it amounts to the same thing. When there is too much work to be done, or not enough work to go around, then human labor loses its value. And what, then, of the humans? What is going to become of them? I worry so much for people in this economy. We all worry, I bet. It seems to be a world-wide problem and it requires creative thinking by economists and governments.

Meanwhile, it seems to me that in this troubled world, we should especially be on guard against avarice. Craving for money distorts life for us. It inclines us toward injustice, so that we use people, maybe even our friends, as means toward our own well-being. It tempts us toward indifference toward the poor and envy of those who seem well off. Preoccupation with money leaves us ungrateful for the good things we do have. It is right to worry about money, and yet we should try not to worry *overmuch*, lest we ruin our own peace and leave onlookers wondering what good is our faith.

One of the outstanding things about Jesus is that he was willing to adjust his conception of what was fit and right for him. By right, he is King of the Universe, and it is worthy of angels and archangels to worship him all the day long. But it could not be so if Jesus meant to save us. For that, he became a poor man and suffered the lot of humanity, in even worse measure than any of us

have known. And so it is that Jesus chose simplicity of life in which he had nowhere to lay his head that someday we might rest in heaven itself.

Jesus accepted simplicity, even lowliness, in order that he might keep his love alive. We might be driven into simplicity these days by the economy, but if so, let us follow the example of our Lord and try even harder to be good people. We might not have control over this world's money, but we do have some control over our love, our faith, and our sense of gratitude for the blessings we do have. "They are a simple people," the pagans used to say about the Christians, "but, my! See how they love one another."

If you a robber baron, then, repent of it. And if you are a poor man or a poor woman, then do not let anxiety about money, nor craving for it, lead you into despair, tempt you to give up, or tempt you to abandon your love of others. Weeping lasts but the night; joy comes in the morning. Someday, these tough times will pass. For now, you might be pressing ahead, sometimes happy, sometimes discouraged, sometimes disappointed in yourself. But one day, these troubles will have passed and you will see with heaven's eyes that you were perhaps most beautiful of all when you were simply trying to make it from one day to the next, and trying to bring some credit to Christ's name along the way, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.