

Oxley Uniting Church 6.30pm Sunday 29 September 2019

Reading 1: 1 Timothy 6:6-19

Reading 2: Luke 16:19-31

It's not the size of your wallet that counts, it's what you do with it!

Epistle reading kind of answers itself. Paul tells Timothy that we should be content with what we've got. Sounds fair. Sounds easy. It's not.

Then he says that the love of money is the root of all kinds of evil.ⁱ Make you want to speculate on the "all kinds of evil"? And that wanting to get rich can lead to falling "into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction."ⁱⁱ If you want to feel a little more self-righteous, you could start to imagine what those "foolish and harmful desires" might be. Because they apply to other people, right?

Paul doesn't elaborate on those bad things, but tells Timothy to command the rich people not to be arrogant or put their faith in wealth and to be generous and willing to share.ⁱⁱⁱ He tells them how to avoid the bad things, or so it seems. But I don't think he's talking about some great big evil here. I don't think that we're talking Aldi shopping bags of corruption or Alan Joyce salary scale love of money. At least, not in the first instance. I think it is more that he's saying that if you don't do the positive things--if you are arrogant about the source of your wealth, and if you don't look for opportunities to do good deeds, and if you are not generous—then that's the problem.

[Hold up dollar coin.] I have in my hand the most powerful thing in our society. Who has this, rules. Ok, so this particular one isn't going to get me very far—a frocok at Maccas possibly, but not much more than that. But the concept of money, and the ability to accumulate it, now there is power. Our dollar coin does not say "in God we trust," that is on US coins. But therein lies the problem: we don't trust in God. By and large, as a society we trust in the almighty dollar.

Both of our readings contain warnings for people who love riches. The popularised, modern version of 1 Timothy 6:10 is "Money is the root of all evil." But that is not what it says. It says that "the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil."

First, let's be clear: God is not against riches, or trade. The old testament reading, which we did not read tonight, has God instructing Jeremiah to buy a piece of land and seal the deeds in a clay jar. Nebuchadnezzar's army is besieging Jerusalem and he's going to have the survivors carted off to Babylon. Jeremiah's act is a promise from God that "houses, fields and vineyards will again be bought in this land."^{iv}

God gave great riches to Solomon. After he becomes King, God appears to Solomon and asks "What would you like me to give you?" Solomon considers his situation and, like someone who realises they've bitten off something bigger than they can chew and calls on God to get them out of it, he says "You have made me king over a people who are so many that they cannot be counted, so give me the wisdom and knowledge I need to rule over them." "Right choice," says God who then gives him what he has asked for and a shitload of riches on top of it.^v

David, Solomon's father, had been rich as well. He had lots of wives and concubines and lots of children. It takes a lot of wealth to run a household as big as David's. He had so many concubines that when he was running away from his son Absalom, he was able to leave ten of them behind to look after the palace.^{vi} David realised that God was making his kingdom prosperous for the sake of his people.^{vii} And yet, and yet, in spite of all the wives and sons and palaces and tributes from other kings, David wasn't satisfied. He spotted Bathsheba taking a bath and he wanted her too. God wasn't happy and his punishment for David was all the trouble that Absalom caused him.^{viii} Sometimes the story of David and Bathsheba is told as though David's sin is lust, but Nathan's relaying of the Lord's message makes it clear that the sin God was punishing was greed. The Lord said: "I made you King of Israel and rescued you from Saul. I gave you his kingdom and his wives; I made you king over Israel and Judah. If this had not been enough, I would have given you twice as much. Why, then, have you disobeyed my commands?"^{ix} So dissatisfaction can lead to greed, which upsets God. But as Andrew preached on greed back on 4 August, I'm not going to focus on that tonight.

Paul is right up front with the warning to be satisfied with what you have in verses 6-8. This is probably where the saying comes from that "you can't take it with you," which is too often a call for self-indulgence. Paul urges contentment with the basics of life, but our society is structured to work against being satisfied with that.

In their 2005 book, *Affluenza*, Clive Hamilton and Richard Denniss point out that despite the fact that Australia is a rich country by any standards, and that by internal standards we are much wealthier than we were in the 1950s, a majority of people feel that they don't have enough money to buy everything that they would like and that they are doing it tough. This feeling is encouraged by politicians and social commentators who draw on the rhetoric of the Aussie battler and who tell us that we don't have enough money for hospitals and schools.^x

"Neoliberal economic policies," Hamilton and Denniss say, "have set out to promote higher consumption as the road to a better society. All the market-based reforms in the last two decades [that would be at least three now] have been predicated on the belief that the best way to advance Australia's interests is to maximise the growth of income and consumption" despite the cost to individuals, society, and the environment.^{xi} "We live in a time when economics and its concerns are more dominant than ever before."^{xii}

Advertisers drive the consumption necessary for economic growth by creating desire for identity and status that is never quite quenched by the products on offer. We are urged to spend more and accumulate more and more stuff. Advertising encourages us to compare our wealth and possessions not to what we need, but to what others have. Consequently, we rack up debt and work longer and harder than ever before and this takes a toll on our health, our families, and our communities. If you're working 10 hour days plus commutes, who has the time or energy for volunteering and community events?

But government policies play a part as well. When the economy rules, the only things of value are those that can be measured in monetary terms. Hamilton and Denniss note that it has now become a thing to weigh up the cost of having a child. They note that "market values have increasingly colonised all other values so that ethical decisions have become economic decisions."^{xiii} So education is only of value for the income that you can earn down the track. Your value as a citizen is defined by your contribution to the economy. Caring

work is some of the lowest paid work in the country. If it is not paid, it is not counted even if it can be valued because it doesn't involve the market.

In part, Hamilton and Denniss are right. But there's another aspect of policy and the dominance of market values going on as well and that is the shift of risk to the individual. Recent research by the YWCA reports that some young women are reconsidering having families because of the implications that time out of the workforce will have for their superannuation.^{xiv} Petra Bueskens, in *New Matilda*, provides a more theoretically reasoned argument for the declining birth rate. She argues that "Mothers are losing out in the neo-liberal economy" because high expectations of motherhood, and policies that favour the breadwinner family model, generate a process of de-skilling and interrupted work histories" that leaves them incredibly vulnerable should their marriage break down as they then find themselves carrying the risk of poverty in the face of a deregulated labour market and lack of economic and social support structures for mothers.^{xv}

When you take away the social safety net, you induce fear that will of course cause individuals to want to accumulate wealth and not take risks, even if that risk is something as seemingly natural as having children.

Our market-driven, economics dominated society ensures that there real penalties for those who take risks and fail. We are expected to live and work to benefit the economy and paradoxically keep spending to keep it going and still responsibly save to provide for our own health and welfare. To do anything else has become risky, and anything that does not have a monetary value and contribute to growth, is not valued.

The trouble is that worries about money and being financially secure take our focus off what is really important and can cause fear and paralysis and that can stop us stepping out in faith or limits our effectiveness in showing God's love to the world.

So how do we remain content with meeting our basic needs now when we live in a society that tells us we need to accumulate more and more and protect ourselves against future risk. I'm not going to claim that there are easy answers for us as Christians or as a Church. It would be hypocritical of me pretend there is. It is something that we have to wrestle with in ourselves and with God. We are struggling against dark forces that present as perfectly reasonable and responsible and the cost of changing our focus to what really matters can be exceedingly high. I think Jesus understood that. Nevertheless, Paul tells Timothy to warn his wealthy charges not to put their hope in the riches they have stored up.

ⁱ 1 Timothy 6:10

ⁱⁱ 1 Timothy 6:9

ⁱⁱⁱ 1 Timothy 6:18-19

^{iv} Jeremiah 32:1-3a, 6-15.

^v 2 Chronicles 1:7-12.

^{vi} 2 Samuel 15: 16.

^{vii} 2 Samuel 5: 12.

^{viii} 2 Samuel 11-12:15; 16:15-23.

^{ix} 2 Samuel 12: 7-9.

^x Hamilton, Clive, and Richard Denniss, *Affluenza: When Too Much is Never Enough*, (Allen & Unwin, 2005): 3-4.

^{xi} Hamilton and Denniss, *Affluenza*, 7-8.

^{xii} Hamilton and Denniss, *Affluenza*, 5.

^{xiii} Hamilton and Denniss, *Affluenza*, 142.

^{xiv} <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2019-07-30/superannation-young-women-fear-retirement-canberra-ywca-report/11365120>

^{xv} Bueskens, Petra, "Fertility Strikes: Modern Motherhood and the De-Regulated Patriarchy," *New Matilda*, 10 May 2019 <https://newmatilda.com/2019/05/10/fertility-strikes-modern-motherhood-and-the-de-regulated-patriarchy/>