

“Jesus’ Mission: Calling Us to Righteousness”  
Luke 18:9-14, 15-30  
March 9, 2008  
The 5<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Lent

The Rev. Christine Chakoian  
First Presbyterian Church  
Lake Forest, Illinois

The monkey trap is what they call it. A container – a hollowed out coconut, a wire cage, an empty gourd – a container is prepared with an opening just large enough for a monkey to get its hand inside. The lure is a piece of food – often some banana. When the monkey reaches in and takes hold of the banana, it forms a fist ... and it cannot get its hand back out again while grasping the food. As long as the monkey is unwilling to let go of the food, the monkey is trapped. Rare is the monkey who will loosen its grip ... even at the price of its freedom ... even at the price of its life.

The monkey trap. I used to think that was just urban legend – or jungle legend, if you will – but then I thought about the monkey I had when I was growing up. Zorba – a squirrel monkey -- was normally kept in her cage. But now and then we’d let her out to run around the house. I have told some of you about the time she found her way onto the dining room table where Mom kept a bowl of fairly realistic plastic grapes. Zorba plucked one off the stem and popped it in her mouth ... and immediately spat it out again. But then she reached right back again and popped another into her mouth – as if she would get a real grape from the ersatz cluster.

Our Scripture today is a series of stories of monkey traps and plastic grapes. Let’s look at each of them more closely.

For the Pharisee whose story the choir sang for us, the monkey trap was the Law, or better said, the good feelings that following the Law gave him. Now the Law isn’t always a monkey trap. We give the Old Testament a bad rap when we discount the goodness of God’s Law. Nowhere does Jesus say that he’s come to overturn the Law. In fact, he says that he’s come not to destroy the Law but to fulfill it. Remember that the Law was a blessing when our ancestors were freed from slavery in Egypt. In the wilderness we were an unformed people without a structure, without values, without identity. No one can live in anarchy for long. So the Law was a gift: a gift from God to help us

know who we are and what a good life looks like. The Law was given to help us value things like loving God, and honoring our parents, and to help us avoid destructive behaviors like lying, stealing, cheating, and envy. The Law is a very good thing. It points us to God, and helps us know what it means to be godly people.

But here's the thing: the Law is *not* God. And the Law becomes a monkey trap when it becomes a substitute for God. Indeed, problems always arise when we confuse anything less than God with God. Or, as my favorite Zen saying goes, the problem comes when we confuse the finger pointing to the moon with the moon. The Law is the finger pointing us to God, but it is not God. And that is an enormous difference.

Do you know how we can tell that the Pharisee gets it wrong? Two ways. First, Scripture says, "the Pharisee prays to himself," which is a tip-off right there. The Pharisee's audience isn't God anymore – it's himself. And second, the Pharisee has disdain for the publican, the tax collector, humbly kneeling next to him. Godliness never produces self-absorption, and it never yields disdain. Real righteousness amplifies our love of God and love of neighbor. The Pharisee has so tightly grasped the good feelings that following the Law gives him that he is trapped by his own self-righteousness.

And that is a pretty comfortable story for us, because frankly, there are few of us here who are so self-satisfied with our own goodness that we would pick up a stone to hurl at anybody else. Notice how the second story starts out just the same way. The ruler, like the Pharisee, has done everything the Law demands – honoring mother and father, not committing adultery or murdering or stealing or lying. But then the zinger comes. Jesus tells him there is just one thing he lacks: he must sell everything and give his money to the poor. At this, the ruler becomes sad, because he is very rich. He can't let his riches go. And that hits a little closer to home.

Recently I've been reading an uncomfortable book, *The Price of Privilege*. The author, Madeline Levine, is a psychologist who specializes in

the treatment of affluent adolescents. Over the years, she has noticed disturbing trends in her practice, and she began to dig through the psychological research. What she found corroborated her personal experience: although Americans' per capita income has more than doubled in the last fifty years, our money has not bought us happiness. Not only are we are *not* twice as happy; instead, Levine says,

“many of us are twice as *unhappy*. Teen suicide has quadrupled in this period of time and rates of divorce have doubled. In addition, we are seeing a far higher incidence of many serious emotional illnesses, such as depression, anxiety disorders, behavioral disorders, self-mutilation, and substance abuse. Apparently economic growth has not improved our psychological condition one bit. And, paradoxically, it appears that the group that is at highest risk of psychological impairment is comprised of the very children we would expect to be benefiting from this upswing in the standard of living” (Madeline Levine, *The Price of Privilege* (NY: HarperCollins, 2006), pp. 40-41).

What is going on? To put it simply, like the ruler who encountered Jesus, we and our children have fallen for a monkey trap: the monkey trap of believing that money can buy us happiness.

Now money, like the Law, is not necessarily a bad thing. One certainly has to have enough money to put food on the table. But beyond that, what difference does money make? In a landmark study of a million people in forty-five countries, two researchers, Drs. Ed Diener and David Myers have looked at the connection between money and happiness. This is what they've found: “Most people in most countries report themselves as being ‘pretty happy.’ In addition to income, factors such as literacy, political freedom, and civil rights all influence a person's happiness, what researchers often call ‘well-being’” (Levine, pp. 38-39, citing D. Myers & E. Diener, “The pursuit of happiness,” *Scientific American* 274 (5), 1996); she cites other works of Diener and Myers spanning 1993-2000). And there are factors that make

people *unhappier*: high poverty rates and limited civil rights. “However,” research goes on to say,

“the majority of people worldwide, regardless of age, race, or socioeconomic status appear to be relatively happy as long as their basic needs are met. ... ‘People who go to work in their overalls and on the bus are just as happy, on the average, as those in suits who drive to work in their own Mercedes’” (Levine, pp. 38-39, citing D. Lykken, *Happiness* (NY: St. Martins Press, 1999)).

What’s true globally is true locally. Even the “Forbes 100” richest people in America register happiness at only slightly greater happiness than the average person (Levine, p. 39, citing R. Inglehart, *Culture Shift in Advanced Industrial Society* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990)). So, Levine says,

“[So] once you have enough money to meet basic needs, money does not make you happier. Money certainly can buy all kinds of ‘stuff.’ It can make it easy to purchase services, and it can buy unique and interesting experiences, but research is very clear on this: money buys *neither* happiness nor unhappiness” (Levine, p. 37, citing R.M. Ryan & E.L. Deci, “On happiness and human potentials: A review of research on hedonic and eudaimonic well-being,” *Annual Review of Psychology* 52, 2001)).

Which leaves us with the \$64,000 question, so to speak: “if money itself is essentially neutral in terms of mental health, then why are the children of affluent families so disproportionately unhappy?” (Levine, p. 37).

The problem, Madeline Levine suggests, is not money itself, but *materialism* – the monkey trap that infuses money with more meaning than it can really give us:

“Materialism is not the same as having money. ... Once basic needs are met, there is no relationship between money and happiness. *Materialism, on the other hand, does predict a lack of happiness and satisfaction.* Materialism is a value system that emphasizes wealth, status, image, and material consumption. It is a measure of how much we value material things over other things in our lives, like friends, family, and work. It keeps us wedded to external measures of accomplishment for a sense of self – prestige, power, money for adults; grades, clothes, electronics for kids.” (Levine, pp. 45-6, citing T. Kasser, *The High Price of Materialism* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002).

Levine wryly notes that it is the Lexus Corporation, and not the American Psychological Association, that brought you the ad, “Whoever said money can’t buy happiness doesn’t know how to spend it” (Levine, p. 38).

Materialism is so prevalent a value in America today that, in spite of the evidence to the contrary, most Americans persist in believing that more money will indeed make them happier ... and the wealthier we are, the more money we think we need – beyond what we already have -- to make us happy.

“A certain ruler asked him, ‘Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?’ ‘You lack only one thing,’ Jesus said. ‘Go, sell all you own, and distribute the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven, and come, follow me.’” Money in itself isn’t bad. It is neutral. But when it becomes the source of our identity, when it poses as genuine treasure ... when materialism suggests that wealth, or status, or image or prestige can make us genuinely satisfied, then it is a monkey trap. A trap that robs us of the very happiness we seek.

Money isn’t the only monkey trap, of course, and Jesus acknowledges as much. “There is no one who has left house or wife or brothers or parents or children *for the sake of the kingdom of God* who will not get back very much more in this age, and in the age to come eternal life.” Anything or anyone, law or riches, spouse or children can pose as ultimate treasure when it is only and always penultimate at best.

I confess that I know this all too well. When I was in my 30s, I thought I had everything I ever could want. A great job on Michigan Avenue, status, education, the opportunity to do good through my work. I left it all behind when I followed John to Oregon for his job, and we had our little baby in tow. Little did I know that this move freed me from the monkey trap of success and prestige and approval. I came to gain my life in deeper ways than I had ever known, simply by giving myself away to this child. I came closer to God through my self-sacrifice, and I gained more than I ever gave up. I found myself apart from any status or achievement; she was a means of grace.

Now I face her last semester in high school, and I have to let her go. It's hard, terribly hard, because once you've experienced a means of grace you want to hang onto it forever. But what I've learned – and continue to learn – is this. It is a monkey trap to grasp anything too tightly, even the most wonderful gifts from God. Gifts like the Law, or gifts like our financial well-being, or gifts like our children and loved ones. Or, to turn to my favorite Zen saying once more, never confuse the finger pointing to the moon with the moon. My daughter is a means of grace, but the means of grace is not God ... and there will always be new grace to be found.

We're all prone to monkey traps, to monkey traps and even plastic grapes sometimes. But Jesus invites us to loosen our grip, and let go whatever we're clutching so tightly. To loosen our grip and open our hand, to open our hand, and follow him. Amen.