

Wisdom and Finance

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St. Andrew's Episcopal Church

This is the second sermon in our series, *Enough: Finding Joy in Simplicity and Generosity*. This one is called "Wisdom and Finance." I'm supposed to say something about how we have a problem trying to "keep up with the Joneses." But I have a problem with that "keep up with the Joneses" expression.

Growing up in Dallas, and now living in the suburbs, Jerry Jones has been my Cowboys dictator for as long as I can remember. My first memory of him is from 1st or 2nd grade, when he fired Tom Landry. Jerk. The shadow of the Jones family stretches long across our fair metroplex, but it's never been a goal of mine to keep up with the Joneses! (I would like a word about draft strategy).

But there is something I admire about the Joneses. So much of the mess that has been the Dallas Cowboys over the last two decades makes infinitely more sense when you realize Jerry Jones desperately wants to be a football guy. He's clear about his purpose and calling in life — to run a football team. To do that, of course, he had to buy one. People often ask why can't Jerry Jones the owner see that Jerry Jones the General Manager is not very good at his job. But that's a silly question: Jerry Jones the owner exists solely to employ Jerry Jones the General Manager.

This may not always produce the best on-field product, but it's hard to overestimate how much power Jerry's sense of purpose and calling exercises over his life (not to mention the hearts and minds of millions of fans). It's religious almost; it's helped him build a great cathedral in Arlington; it's changed the face of the NFL and its place in American society. And it's not just because Jerry Jones cares about money (surely he does, but all those owners do). What's special about Jerry is his sense of purpose and calling for football.

I am absolutely convinced that if we Christians spoke with 1/10 the enthusiasm and passion about our faith with which the Jones family talks Cowboys... friends, revival would break out. Maybe we'd do better to keep up with the Joneses...to let our purpose and calling determine our lives the way his purpose and calling has determined his.

Our readings today are about our purpose and calling, not as Joneses, but as children of God and brothers and sisters of our Lord, Christ Jesus.

Our reading from Micah this morning suffers a little from being all crumpled up into a single paragraph. If you look carefully, you'll see there are quotation marks scattered throughout; this whole passage is a conversation with three speakers: the prophet himself, the Lord, and the personified people. Verses 1–2 are in the voice of the prophet, who is essentially saying, "Listen up, God's got a beef with the people of Israel."

In verses 3–5 God himself is speaking. The historical references there are a little obscure for 21st century American Christians. Fear not if you don't actually know "what happened from Shittim to Gilgal." The Lord's point is fairly simple: I saved you from slavery, and I blessed you with the Promised Land. You have been saved and you have been blessed. By me.

And the Lord's frustrated implication is basically, "Is that not enough? Why would you turn your hearts from me, seeking wealth and security on your own terms, with violence, and manipulation, and cheating?"

Then, in verse 6, personified Israel speaks. He speaks like man who has just realized he forgot his anniversary. I'll paraphrase: "Oh no. What should I do? Roses?" Then it escalates. "Jewelry? Gold? Diamonds?"

Does God need us to appease him with presents? Is that what God wants from us? No. Listen: God doesn't want your stuff. God wants you. We can never give him our stuff in place of giving him ourselves. Now the Bible is also clear we can't give God ourselves without also giving of our stuff. But it is entirely possible to give our stuff with our giving ourselves, and that won't work.

The message here gets delivered by the prophet. Paraphrasing wouldn't do it justice: "He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" (Micah 6:8).

It's one of the most beautiful summaries of our purpose and calling in the whole Bible: to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with our God. Would you let your heart hear those words of God for you this morning?

In our gospel reading this morning we heard the record of Jesus' first public teaching in the synagogue in Nazareth. He took out a scroll of prophecy, not the Micah text we've been reading, but one from Isaiah, and read it aloud. The message is, broadly speaking, the same as that in Micah: Jesus says, "I have come to bring justice and kindness to the oppressed, to proclaim the Lord's favor and grace."

And at the end of the gospel story, immediately prior to his Ascension, Jesus entrusts this good news, this purpose and calling to his followers. What's different now is not the message of what God wants of us, but that in the death and

resurrection of Jesus Christ, God has done something about it in a new way, made it possible for all people to walk humbly with God.

Do you see the calling and purpose Micah describes is in line with Jesus' calling and purpose, which Jesus in turn gives to the Church, and gives it to us with the power of the Resurrection to make it real in the world today?

I believe with all my heart that St. Andrew's understands this calling and purpose. Some days, frankly, I wish we understood it a little less. My kids do this thing where when we tell them they have four more bites of dinner left, and then they can see the end in sight, and then they immediately shove all four bits in their mouth in rapid succession. And then they look like chipmunks. And then they realize their mouths are so full their jaws won't move. And then they try to add some water to lubricate everything. And then their eyes get real wide and then they start making this funny noise. And then an explosion of rice and green beans and ketchup and chicken comes flying out across the table. And then they ask how many bites they have left. And the answer is still four. Anyway, there's a little degree to which someday I get that wide-eyed mouth too full feeling at St. Andrew's with all we're taking on right now. And that's awesome.

Just think about our two great big initiatives that are still in the early phases. There's the Blessmobile — which is expanding not just as a food ministry, but as a relational ministry. We could legitimately call it "Adopt a Housing Project" right now. With money from grants and other funds given specifically for that purpose, we'll soon be driving a food trailer, serving a weekday meal, and maybe even adding another site. That's some doing justice, loving kindness, and walking humbly with our God right there.

As for our other big new initiative, you're sitting it in. And look, I'm not standing here in the cafeteria of an elementary school filled with crickets so that I can preach stewardship sermons to the pre-existing congregation of St. Andrew's. That may be happening today, but that's not what this is about. This is about transforming individuals and our community with the redeeming power of Jesus' love.

That's not all. There's a floor in a church on the coast in Belize; a retired woman spending Thursday morning with a 4th grader whose never known any stranger to care that much before; there's the sacrament of our Lord's Body and Blood brought to a woman that can no longer walk to the front door of her house; Bible studies in which people's fear of God breaks apart before the power of his love; there's CD of VBS music that's been in the car radio since June full of songs about God that my kids, and 100 others in this church, all know by heart.

Do you see how what we're doing at St. Andrew's aligns with our scriptural purpose and calling? We're not perfect of course; as Paul would say, we're pressing on towards the goal, it's not that we've already reached it.

It's good for the church to get aligned with God's purpose and calling — but God's purpose and calling is individual too. There are a thousand and one opportunities to live this out each week, to love God, to love your neighbor, to care for your family, to care for creation, to bless the poor, and to bear witness to the suffering of the least in our society.

These are all opportunities that call us out of ourselves; turn our heart inside out so that it's facing the world. These are callings that, if we give ourselves to them, will use up our lives.

There's this nasty pernicious lie in the world, the source of untold pain and destruction. That lie is that we are to use this life for our own benefit and pleasure. That's not true. We are to be used in this life for the purposes of the kingdom of God. We are not to use this life for ourselves, but be used in this life by God.

And that is true because that's what God does, and we are made in God's image. The three persons of the Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, do not turn in on themselves, but turn outward in creative love, redeeming love, sanctifying love.

I'm going to quote George Bernard Shaw, who did not believe in God, but who managed to figure this out. And if he could figure it out, we who know God's love and claim to reflect his image have no excuse. He wrote, "This is the true joy in life, the being used for a purpose recognized by yourself as a mighty one; the being thoroughly worn out before you are thrown on the scrap heap; the being a force of Nature instead of a feverish selfish little clod of ailments and grievances complaining that the world will not devote itself to making you happy" (*Man and Superman*).

Simply because the world would much rather have us be clods of ailments and grievances and complaints, for which it will happily sell us superficial remedies, it actually takes some wisdom just to figure this out. But true wisdom isn't knowing that we have greater purpose than our own material comfort and security; true wisdom is making a plan to live out that purpose.

Like anything else in this life, any plan for how to get there includes having a plan for how to pay for it. My sister-in-law wanted to become, and now is, a doctor. She didn't do it by spending an hour a week watching Dr. Oz on television. That would make her a doctor only to the extent that an hour a week of Joel Osteen (or Mike Michie, or Andrew Van Kirk) would make a Christian. No, it took her time, her talents, and a considerable amount of money.

There's a sheet in your seat this morning, one side of it is entitled "My Life and Financial Goals Worksheet." I commend this to you, not just in this moment, but at some period of time this week — that period of time being at least as long as it takes you to drink a cup of coffee. Notice how it starts not with a financial question, but a life question. Please start at the top and not at the bottom. Too often in my own life I've budgeted first, and let my budget determine what my life could be about.

Hopefully your answer to that first question will be something in line with Micah 6:8 — to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God. It could be a little more narrow and specific — my doctor sister-in-law would certainly approach it from the kindness and love of medicine. It might involve your family, or a cause the Lord has laid on your heart. Once you answer that question, work down from there.

The last three questions are about specific financial goals, short-term, mid-range, and long-term. Make one of the two goals in each section relate specifically to your faith. We must be able to answer the question of where our faith is in our financial plan, otherwise our budget will fail to fulfill our purpose and calling.

Finally, a word about what those goals might look like. You may think I want those to look like "Give 5% of income to St. Andrew's." "Give 10% of my income to St. Andrew's." Well, that'd be great — but I don't mean write down three tithing goals. I encourage you to be more creative; this is a question not just of finance, but of wisdom.

One of my long term financial goals is for Stephanie and I to be able to walk the pilgrimage route called the Camino de Santiago in Spain — the whole thing — after our last kid finally goes to college. Maybe I'm taking that "walk humbly with your God" thing too literally, but I know my own soul and how I relate to God.

Maybe you want to go to Belize in 2018. Or you want to leave a legacy of sacred beauty in a new sanctuary on McKinney Ranch Pkwy. Or you want to retire early so you can pursue your passion for teaching chess to underprivileged middle schoolers. I don't know...but I do know this: if we don't plan our finances from our purpose and calling, we'll end up just living to pay all the bills that we incur without ever really thinking about it — you know, like the check from a random Tuesday night at Olive Garden.

And I don't know about you, but when I'm laying in the hospital for the last time, with Stephanie at my side holding my hand, I'd much rather say, "Do you remember that time when we walked across Spain on our pilgrimage and how much we felt God's presence?" than, "Do you remember the never ending pasta bowls — and how much we liked rigatoni?"

Amen.