

Are We Having Any Fun Yet?

Advent II

Text: Amos 8:5; James 4:13-14

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

Well, are we having any fun yet? The season is well underway, the holidays are bearing down upon us, the calendar is crowded, the activity has become more intense, the deadlines face us, and I thought it might be well this morning to raise that question - Are we having any fun yet? That question, of course, arises in our contemporary culture at moments when we are in a flurry of activity, when we have gone through great exertion, when we have moved mountains, so to speak, on behalf of our pleasure and happiness, and in a moment of awareness, look at each other and have to laugh at ourselves and say, "Are we having any fun yet?"

I speak this morning about what I sense is true, not only of myself, but of most of us and contemporary society, and that is that our lives are marked by an increasing frenzy and drivenness, and the irony is that the Advent season is a season that calls us to wait quietly in contemplation and reflection on the question, for example, in James, "What is your life before the face of God?"

I touched on this Labor Day weekend in a sermon about keeping Sabbath, noting how Sabbath observance had become the weekend, and how so many of us expend great energy accumulating our toys, gathering our brood, heading somewhere to a point of pleasure, only to come home at the end of the weekend tired, weary, and exhausted, a time when I think the question may arise, "Are we having any fun yet?" It is a question that has popped up in our contemporary society because of that very drivenness of which I speak, the fact that our lives are busier, the lights are brighter, the sounds are louder, and the whole pace of things continues to speed up, and in this Advent season, as I said, which ironically is a time in which we are invited to slow down and to wait, to reflect, and to prepare for the coming of the Lord, that very aspect of contemporary life is exacerbated with so many wonderful things which we do and to which we are all invited - the galas, the celebrations, the parties, the shopping, the baking and all of the rest. So, I thought it would be well this morning for just a few moments, gathered here in the beauty of the sanctuary on an Advent Sunday to think about our lives and about how we are living them and whether or not we are living them, or whether

we are being lived, whether we are using our time or whether we are being used, whether we are directing our resources or whether they are being directed, whether, in other words, we are living out of the inwardness of the Spirit, or whether we have become the captives of a culture that increasingly stifles the spirit. It's not easy to live in a culture in counter-cultural fashion. But, if one would cultivate the life of the spirit in the present day, one would certainly be swimming upstream and fighting a momentous force that would carry us in quite another direction.

What is going on, anyway? Well, we live in a consumer society. We have been shaped into consumers, and that's not a new idea. We're all really aware of it if we think about it for a while. A consumer, of course, is one who consumes, and to consume demands the expenditure of time and energy and resource, and all that is consumed is taken away from that larger whole and there have been many voices that have been raised about the dangers or perils of a consumer society. Consumption for needs is one thing, even for desires is one thing, but the economist, John Kenneth Galbraith, back in the 80s wrote a very significant book entitled *The Affluent Society*, in which he pointed out the nature of our society today which is different from any other society, in terms of its economy and its practice of living, in all of history, and that is that we have become a society in which desires are created in order to be fulfilled.

So, we have been created more and more as a consumer society by the forces of production that would address not simply the things that we need for our human existence, but rather, plant ideas in our heads, so to speak, create the desire which makes us a consumer of the product that is then gladly supplied. It becomes a syndrome which feeds on itself. The producer creates the means of developing the appetite for the product, and the producer producing the product, having the capacity, needs to produce more product, and so there is more bombarding of the human psyche seeking to instill a broader need or a desire base and a greater appetite to consume and it's all a very vicious circle. Galbraith pointed out that that is what is new about our society today, and I suspect that if we are sensing that we are being driven, if we are feeling more of the frenzied, frazzled edge of life, it has something to do with this very drive to consumerism of which we are a part.

If you want examples of this, watch television a little bit. Just watch the "Today" show and see how many times Katie Couric bops back on the screen for a five-second appearance just to remind us that, after all, we are tuned into "Today", suggesting that they will be right back after these messages. The commercials are messages, of course. Messages are generally helpful. They are always suggestive, and you may be like me, just simply irritated about the fact that you can't even get the weather report in so that, at the end of the day I know what I ought to buy, but I don't know if it's going to rain or snow. And when you take the number of minutes in any hour that is given over to the commercials, you understand that something is going on. Who owns the networks? Corporate America owns the

networks, and the great producers of the nation controlling the networks use them as a marvelous, sleepless machine, a 24-hour money machine to bombard us with messages that instill within us from the outside desires that create the need to consume, and it is a hallmark of our present human existence.

We have become a consumer society in the extreme and, of course, there is a justice issue here. The figures about the consumption of the average American over against the average person any other place in the world you want to go is embarrassing, and the amount of resource and energy and time expended to provide that is amazing, and the cost of that in terms of environment, ecological concerns, natural resources is a matter about which serious and reflective people have spoken, but that's not really my point this morning. My point is rather to call us to awareness of this shaping of us from the outside by a cultural milieu that would make us its pawns and keep us from living out of our inwardness, out of our spirit, this peril of being lived rather than living, this stifling of the spirit through inordinate consumption by obsessive desires for accumulation, gathering of toys, and all of the other aspects of our contemporary, affluent society.

The story is told of an old Texas Ranger who was brought to Dallas and the headquarters of the great Nieman-Marcus store and given a tour by the President, and he was asked afterwards what he thought about it. He said, "Well, I don't think I've ever seen so many things I didn't need." I think that sums up pretty well what I'm trying to say about the psychology that is being foisted on us by a consumer society that is marked by the creation of desire rather than the meeting of needs. Now, I may hear some voices out there saying, "But, look at how wonderfully we have profited in this country with this particular kind of economic structure and order," and I want to be very clear this morning that I have all the respect in the world for entrepreneurial endeavor, for confidence, for industry and hard work, and for the character that it takes to build that kind of empire, and I want to be very clear this morning also that I am not pointing to a problem of the affluent into which category most all of us would fall.

What I'm talking about this morning is not a problem of the rich. It may be more a problem of the wanna-be rich, those of us whose appetites have been stimulated to reach just beyond our means and to gain that which is, if all things were rationally discerned, beyond our grasp. I'm talking about a social problem which is a spiritual problem and about the fact that we can so easily get swept away into the cultural stream that we fail to be conscious of what's happening to us, and that failure of awareness is deadly because before long we become automatons, we simply lose the soul and we fail to live out of the spirit and God knows we won't know what to do with waiting before the face of God, being still and contemplating the question, "What is your life?"

What I am speaking about is not new, for that question, "What is your life?" was offered by James in the context in which he was saying, "Woe to you who sit in Christ Community Church at the 10 o'clock service, planning your business

agenda for Monday. Woe to you who cannot rest on the Sabbath or keep a holy day, for that driving desire to get on with business as usual." Indeed, the marvelous Hebrew prophets who were such incisive critics of society recognized exactly the same thing. Those who couldn't rest for needing to get back to business. So, it's not a new problem. It's just that in our contemporary society, it has increased exponentially because never before has there been a society in which every aspect of life has been pervaded by the matter of wealth and acquisition and so forth.

An American philosopher, Jacob Needleman, has written a book with the unlikely title, *Money and the Meaning of Life*, in which he suggests that to come to the understanding of the meaning of money has to do with coming to the understanding of life, and he suggests an analogy for where our American society finds itself today. The analogy is that of a prison. A prison is full of prisoners who have been there so long that they have forgotten about life on the outside. They have forgotten even that there is a life on the outside, so that they have been so conditioned, become so adapted that they begin to believe that life in prison is simply a given of being human, and so they live within the prison walls. They have their spats, their controversies, they envy one another for what one might get and another not. It's an enlightened prison, there's a library stocked with good books and they read and they can study and they can organize and they have clubs and all sorts of things, and they work at improving their life, their society, but all within prison walls because they have forgotten that there is any other possibility. Then occasionally, someone comes in from the outside, a messenger from the outside who tells them about life outside and the messenger is met with mockery or with hostility. They are isolated or they are killed because the whole self and social project is threatened by that suggestion that there is another way to live and to be.

Jacob Needleman suggests that we are in great danger today of being a part of a society that has forgotten that there is another way to be, that there is a spiritual dimension out of which one is called to live before the face of God, and that the messenger who comes in and whispers about another way is that occasional glimpse that we get in those all too rare moments of self-consciousness and reflection, and he suggests that that occasional glimpse is a call, a wish, a deep realization that we are being lived rather than living, and that our spirit has been stifled by what is often referred to as the rat race of our lives.

That is the deeper issue, you see. We are probably not more materialistic than people of other times and places, and we are certainly not less spiritually hungry, and we have enjoyed tremendous blessings in the manner and mode of our living, but what is different again is the pervasiveness of that culture of consumption that calls us to acquisition, that wraps the promise of happiness in all kinds of things and toys and stimulates us to get on the fast track to wealth, to prosperity, to the good life, pummeled as we are by images of the suave and the chic and those who are with it who drive luxury cars.

What I am dealing with, what I am pointing to, what I am suggesting is that, on occasion, when those moments of awareness arise, we let them be there for a bit, that we think, that we determine that we live from the inside out rather than being forced, jammed into a cookie cutter prison from without. What I am suggesting this morning is that two selves live within us, as the German poet Goethe said, and that that spiritual self in all of its weakness and its vulnerability that gives us a "beep" now and then is precisely the source calling us to life that is life, indeed, that is spiritually rich, that is full, that is happy.

A few weeks ago for a couple of weeks in Perspectives, we had the Hope Social Psychologist Dr. David Myers here, whose recent book, *The American Paradox: Spiritual Hunger in an Age of Plenty*, documents item after item making the case that we are two and a half times wealthier than forty years ago and significantly less happy in a society that has social ills, and dis-ease, that all of our prosperity and all of our goods and all of our affluence have not been able to deal with, and may well have something to do with cause. And so, this morning, just in case you've had a murmur from within, or just in case this very experience and moment might raise your consciousness, it would fulfill its purpose if it brought you to a new awareness.

Our Presidential election process seems to be coming toward its end and it has unraveled in legal and judicial fashion and one of the great strengths of this nation is that it will be settled and we will move on, but it has been so obvious over the past weeks that there are those who live with such partisanship and such ideological commitments that one simply knows that they are living without awareness. How can one carry placards and hoot and holler and cheer and boo? And those kinds of obsessive compulsions to that which is not ultimately important?

Once awareness dawns and I begin to live out of the spirit, I am able to observe, or the spirit in me observes that which is going on around me, and I become the silent observer, unwilling to be pushed with the maddening crowd, unwilling to be herded by a captivating culture that would rob me of my soul.

Good friends, are we having any fun yet?

References:

Jacob Needleman. *Money and the Meaning of Life*. New York: Currency Doubleday, 1991.

David G. Myers. *The American Paradox: Spiritual Hunger in an Age of Plenty*. Yale University Press, 2000.