

Sermon Text for January 19, 2020

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Deuteronomy 23:19-20, Acts 19:23-29

“When a culture of profit gets in the way of a culture of Providence”

I'll never forget the words that my mom said to me sometime when I was in middle school. She told me you don't have to find a job every summer, you will have plenty of time to work when you get out of school. Since I was a young boy, before middle school, I loved to work. I was a paperboy in early middle school. The summer of my 8th grade year I was in charge of all the landscaping for the development where we lived, the missionary housing complex in Ventnor. Throughout high school and college I worked at Golf and Tennis World doing everything that they asked me to do. I loved to work, it wasn't a drudgery, I didn't dread it, it was just what you did. As a result of my work I sometimes made some money as well. I'll never forget as a high school getting \$100 tip from Charlie Daniels for bringing his bags into the hotel where I worked in Atlantic City at Golf and Tennis World.

As Protestants you have inherited what is called the Protestant Work Ethic where the early settlers who were Reformed Christians as we are were told if you don't work you don't eat. You worked hard because it built character and it was the Christian thing to do, work hard that is. The purpose of working hard was never meant to be so that you could make more money, at least not in the world in which I grew up. When I went to college I worked hard at school because the goal for us in college was to work hard so that we could make the world a better place. It wasn't so that you could graduate and get the highest paying job. That was never my goal nor the goal that my college ever put out there.

In seminary you worked hard so that more people would come to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ and so that the church, the body of Christ, would have a shepherd how was working hard to keep them close to Christ. Throughout my life a culture of pursuing Providence was built up which saw hard work as the way in which this culture was able to be established and have an impact on my life. Work was the result of pursuing Providence, looking for the will of God. This continued throughout my life and I think I was incredibly naïve and thought that this was, or at least ought to be, the goal of every Christ, that we pursue Providence and then whatever comes as a result we would take it.

When we moved to Russia I found myself in a church where I was the pastor and half the congregation was white and the other half were people of color. Those who were white I would say at least a dozen were millionaires and probably a few, not just one, were billionaires, and

they loved Jesus and they found themselves in a world of business that I had never experienced or been exposed to before in my life. I saw an incredible clash of the culture of profit and the culture of Providence in a way that I realized very quickly that the two could not co-exist. As a result of that experience I have developed a somewhat skeptical, some would say a cynical, view of business and see the principles of the pursuit of profit as being diametrically opposite the pursuit of Providence or of God.

My brother, on the other hand, does see how there can be a pairing and a complementary approach to business and mission. This week you will have me preaching from Acts 19 on how profit and Providence are mutually exclusive, and next week he will preach on how they can be complementary. Remember, I'm your pastor and I'm right and be sure to tell him that next week. Let's read in Acts 19.

READ SCRIPTURE

We have a very random Scripture in Deuteronomy which tells us that we are not to charge interest on our co-nationals. It is a warning not just against usury, so charging too much interest, but a command to charge no interest at all for those who love God like you do and come from the same people known as the Israelites, the people of God. Those of you who have a mortgage on your house think of that. What if we had bankers in this congregation who lent you money to buy your house at no interest, would that make a difference in your bottom line? Bankers, what if you had enough money to make that happen, would you make it happen?

But why would God command the people of God not to charge interest to each other? Look at vs.20, the purpose was so that God could bless all of you, in that you as a nation will undertake. The purpose was for the common good. Don't allow the culture of profit and the pursuit of profit to put you in a position where you are putting your neighbor, your fellow country man and woman, at a disadvantage by demanding interest. For the health of the nation do not profit from other people around you. You don't need all you have so share what you have with those around you.

That sounds pretty simplistic, doesn't it? But think about it. A man once said: "what good is it to sit at a lunch counter if you can't afford to buy a cheeseburger." MLK knew that you can combat racism all you want, but if there is a systemic inequity within our country which keeps certain people in certain economic conditions then you are not going to ever see the difference that needs to be seen. For the health of the nation we need to realize that everyone is born with the same talent but not everyone is born with the same opportunity. We need to see that the health of the island of Puerto Rico has a direct impact on the health of those of us in

Puerto Rico because we are, as Deuteronomy tells us, part of those same people that God is trying to bless and the more we bring our nation on board the more God is able to bless.

Some of us may think that we don't normally see a difference, that what one US citizen does we consider the same as what another might do. Then ask this question, why did we get up in arms about what Kaepernick did but we didn't and don't pay any attention to what Lancaster Mennonite does in regards to the flag. There is not a single American flag on that campus. But the kids at LMH, most of them at least, look and act more like us and come from families that we know. Kaepernick is the other. No, we are both citizens of this country and Deuteronomy states that we should try to ensure that all people are able to prosper in equal terms, even if that means that those of us who have much are willing to give so that those who live their lives in this country at a disadvantage can have the same opportunity.

When we go to Acts 19 we see a really interesting story of this guy names Demetrius who was a hard worker and recognized this new upstart religion called the Way that was beginning to grow in influence. He saw that this new movement, what we call our belief system or Christianity, was a threat, an economic threat. We find him basically giving a stump speech where he says "I can guarantee more jobs and that you will keep your jobs, that your jobs will not be shipped out to Egypt. The Christians if they enter our culture will take away your jobs, they will raise your taxes, they will take away your social security, they will socialize your medicine, plus they drink blood and eat body parts." Men, he says, our livelihood is at stake.

And he was right. Paul's preaching caused the magicians of Ephesus to burn their books and to transition from a lucrative trade in magic to something completely different. Now those who made silver structures and other man made creatures were in danger of losing their jobs and they were not excited by it. You know you can preach your own religion all you want but once it starts to hit my bottom line I'm not going to stand for it. We find ourselves again in Ephesus which was not only the center of magic but also the center of the goddess Artemis who was a many breasted goddess who represented fertility and her temple was considered one of the 7 wonders of the world. She was seen as a bountiful earth mother and goddess of banking and protector of debtors. When the people worshipped her it was a stranger mashing of idolatrous religious worship and economic interest, and it comes out in these Scriptures.

But Artemis has her devotees in every town, even today. She isn't called artemis, however, but she might be called profit. At the end of this Scripture the mob scene is a vivid testimony to the power of economic self-interest to sway the crowd. I really hesitated to preach on this topic today. We have so much to celebrate. All of our numbers are pointing in the right

direction. Our attendance has blossomed, our giving skyrocketed last year. Each of those things are markers in our culture of a healthy church. But Jesus' followers all abandoned him when he was on the cross and he was buried as a poor man in a borrowed grave, financially broke. That was our Jesus.

So our markers for success in ministry and in life are so very different from the makers of our Savior. He tells a rich man to sell all that he has and give it to the poor. He tells his disciples that it will be harder for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven than it is for a camel to enter the eye of a needle, and just the other week I was trying to thread a needle and my eyes are so bad that I failed. I couldn't imagine a camel fitting through. We read in Scripture that you can't serve God and mammon. Providence and Profit seem like two opposing masters in Scripture. Certainly in Acts the work of spreading the Gospel was seen as a threat because it inevitably required the abolishment of a thriving business which went contrary to the Gospel.

I fully recognize that my position is extreme and without real practical application. My brother will probably not tell you that and he will say I have a point. But in our culture profit does not leave room for all people to succeed and that is what God wants. He wants all people to come to a saving knowledge of him which will then translate into all people having the same opportunity to buy that cheeseburger. But you say that is the way of the world, some have and some don't. Yes, that is the way of the world but not the way of God. God wants everyone to have enough so that they would not be in want or in need. Give us this day our daily bread. We expect that for everyone.

In the pursuit of profit just the strongest and the one with the most connections and the most opportunity wins. Profit inevitably gets in the way of Providence because profit only has the individual in mind and not the community or the nation as a whole. The Bible, certainly what we saw in Deuteronomy, appeals to the whole community, every single member. If you make less money it won't hurt you and it will be of benefit to your neighbor so then we all win. Businesses as mission must assume a mission that sees profits as secondary to Providence and when you do that it is no longer a business, it is a charity.

Somewhere along the line we were taught that the only way to prosper is to defeat people. A sports culture requires winners and losers. A profit culture requires winners and losers. I'm not a fan of participation awards, but real life does not require that profit come at the expense of someone not making ends meet or at the expense of someone who is different from us.

So where does that leave us? It leaves us asking ourselves the question if we are pursuing a culture of profit or a culture of Providence in our own lives. Is our loving God just an afterthought whom we thank for our success. We know that what we pursue we will be a slave to. If we pursue profit then we and our families will be driven to its goals and its temptations. If we are pursuing God and making decisions based upon not your bottom line but your interpretation of Scripture and the movement of the Holy Spirit and profit happens to come, then praise God. Amen.