



# TRINITY EPISCOPAL CHURCH

*on the Branford Green*

May you find Christ, Community and Compassion within these historic walls.

Sermon preached by Rev. Sharon Gracen

September 26 2010

## **In God We Trust?**

Well, I've really painted myself into a corner here. No rector in her right mind wants to preach about money within the first month of arriving at a new church. But I used up preaching about Amos and the prophets last week and cannot avoid what confronts us in today's lectionary; the uncomfortable statement in the letter to Timothy that "the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil" and the Gospel story of the selfish rich man who ends up in hell. And so I prayed about it, a lot, and knowing what an important topic it is for those of us on a spiritual journey, I thought I'd give it a try. This pulpit feels more like the 3 meter high dive today, so I'm going to close my eyes, and dive in, trusting in the Spirit, because that's what it's really all about.

Let's start at the beginning; what is money? Short and sweet, it is a medium of exchange. But we all know that it's more than that. In our culture, it represents power, security, and identity. Our relationship to money is a powerful force and often without our even knowing it, we can be controlled by it. Is it any wonder that Jesus preached about money more than anything except the kingdom of God?

Being honest with ourselves about money is a critical spiritual issue. Even though our money says "In God We Trust", when it comes to feeling safe and secure, we tend to trust in our bank accounts more than anything else. How many people do you know who feel that they have enough money? Even people who are wealthy by anyone's standards when asked how much would they need to feel really secure, will often say, "A bit more than I have now." And so we spend our time looking for a sense of security in what the letter to Timothy calls "uncertain riches." And who amongst us, after the recent and current financial debacle has not experienced the reality of, "here today, gone tomorrow"?

Including your relationship with and understanding of money into your spiritual pursuits will bring you to a very different place. If we say that we believe in and trust God, can we trust that what God has given us will be enough? God invites us into a mindset of abundance, which promises us freedom from the anxiety of not having enough. We are called to generosity and the spiritual discipline of giving away from our abundance so that we may practice our trust in God. But like any measure of spiritual growth, it does not come naturally or easily. It does take practice.

When I first talked about money with members of the lay leadership here at Trinity, I was counseled to be aware that New Englanders have a pretty frugal approach to money, especially giving it away. Don't get me wrong, I love Yankee sensibilities, pragmatism, spirit and backbone. Having lived in Orange County, California for six years, I appreciate the ethos here more than I can tell you. But what I want you to hear is, yes, embrace your heritage and be true to your culture, but don't let it distract you from God's invitation to live in the attitude of abundance, to share generously from what God has given all of us who are so blessed living in this bountiful country and beautiful town.

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We also have to think about money in the big picture as the prophets might see it – what role does it play in our society? There is ample evidence that we are a nation obsessed with wealth. It is the idol that we bow down to like a golden calf. Now, I am not saying that money isn't necessary. There is nothing spiritually uplifting about grinding poverty. There is a direct correlation to happiness and contentment when one rises out of poverty but happiness does not continue to increase with added wealth. At some point, having more becomes a goal unto itself – which fits well with the definition of an idol.

When Peter returned from Scotland this week, he brought with him a very interesting book, which is apparently making quite a splash in the UK. It is entitled *The Spirit Level*, but its subtitle is more revealing—*Why Equality Is Better for Everyone*. I have not read the whole book yet, but I am very impressed with its basic conclusion—human societies with the highest levels of income disparity between the top 20% and the bottom 20% have the most health and social problems. It may or may not come as a surprise that the US has the second highest income disparity in the world—only Singapore outranks us. Interestingly, the authors who are epidemiologists, also found that there was no direct correlation between a nation's average income and the level of its health and social ills—but there is all kinds of evidence that the key factor that produces those problems is the size of the gap between the richest and the poorest. Countries with the largest gap have the most widespread incidence of a shocking list that includes violence, imprisonment, depression, teenage births, trailing educational performance, homicides, and addictions. According to the authors, the most important thing about that income gap is that it erodes trust, and it is the erosion of trust that leads to these social ills. They say, “High levels of trust mean that people feel secure, they have less to worry about, they see others a co-operative rather than competitive.” In countries like the US, where the income disparity is great, trust evaporates. Apparently the letter to Timothy got it right, “For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil.” This spiritual truth has been known for a long time, and we are living in an era in which it has come true with a vengeance.

We come together here at Trinity for many reasons, but I hope that the main one is to grow spiritually. Such growth does not happen magically, it requires our awareness and our commitment and our practice. It also requires some honest introspection about serious topics; topics like trust and where we place it. Christian communities, like the early Church, are meant to be oases of equality, love and trust, which now appears somewhat counter-cultural in American society. What this means for us is that the challenge to live into our collective spiritual journey at Trinity is more intense than ever, but the rewards of succeeding will be far sweeter. We are called to a way of abundance, generosity, and sacrifice.

We are a community that knows it belongs together, because of the many traditions, beliefs, common experiences, and hopes that we share as Christians and as Episcopalians, and as a consequence of that belonging, we learn to trust each other. It then becomes encumbant on us to teach the world around us what it looks like to reclaim the trust that has been lost. We can teach trust in God and each other and put the welfare of the community before our own desires.

Embracing a ministry of trust might serve as the answer to the third major theological question I posed three weeks ago, “What do we do now?” We are here to belong to each other in community, to act as prophets in heightening our sensitivity to the injustices and imbalances of



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human society, and to live in trust, so that we might not only thrive as a community but help transform the world around us by teaching abundance, trust and love.