

1 Sermon, September 25, 2011

Texts: Ecclesiastes 5:8-12, Matthew 16:24-28, 1 Timothy 6:6-10

Title: **"When Dreams Become Nightmares"**

What do the following facts tell you?

1. There have been steady annual declines in the sale of life insurance policies for the past 20 years (with a few exceptions).
2. Average credit card debt per household with credit card debt is \$5100 and expected to rise to \$6500 by the end of 2011;
3. One out of every 22 credit card holders is 60+ days behind on payments;
4. The average consumer carries 4 credit cards;
5. At the end of 2010, there was one bankruptcy filing for every 160 Americans.
6. Fewer banks are offering traditional Christmas Club accounts, where patrons could save up for Christmas.
7. Payday loans are one of the fastest growing industries in the country.
8. Less than half of Americans have an Individual Retirement Account, and 36 percent of Americans say that they don't contribute anything at all to retirement savings.

These statistics are striking. The financial instruments that are distrustful of the future are shrinking. The financial instruments that put off decisions until later are growing.

Some of the traditional ways of minimizing risk and working ahead toward the future are things like life insurance, which protects from future loss, a Christmas Club account, to save for Christmas, have both experienced dramatic declines. It is also becoming clear that many working adults have not set aside much money to sustain them in retirement.

What *has* grown is the number of payday loans and payday loan stores, which offer small loans to be paid back on payday. This is essentially borrowing against the future. Credit Card debt is also a way of borrowing against future income, and paying a high interest rate to do so.

Why this increase in borrowing against future income?

Why do many people seem shortsighted when it comes to money?

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Well, I think it's two things:

First, people expect to get the things they want, and there are more things to want all the time.

Second, the average income is going down, so other means are found to gain a little more money to buy those things that people "absolutely need to have."

It's nothing new. The Bible tells us in several places that the love of money can lead people astray:

1 Timothy 6:10b, NIV - Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith, and pierced themselves with many griefs.

Ecclesiastes 5:10 - The lover of money will not be satisfied with money; nor the lover of wealth, with gain. This also is vanity.

Matthew 16:26 - For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in return for their life?

Adam Hamilton, pastor at the United Methodist Church of the Resurrection in Kansas City, says it boils down to two maladies, Affluenza and Credititis

Affluenza is the constant need for more and bigger and better stuff—as well as the effect that this need has on us. It is the desire to acquire, and most of us have been infected by this virus to some degree.

- The average American home went from 1,660 square feet in 1973 to 2,400 square feet in 2004.
- Today there is estimated to be 1.9 billion square feet of self-storage space in America.
- There are more and more gadgets that take our time and our money. There may be a million little programs called "apps" that you can put on a smart phone

Affluenza is not just the result of good advertising or peer pressure. Affluenza is a disease that we're susceptible to because of the human desire for respect and recognition, and the idea that more or better stuff will lead others to respect us more. Affluenza is also a temptation to get stuff that seems interesting or new or pretty. It's the same desire to *explore* something new that drove Lewis and Clark and also drives us to learn new gadgets.

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The problem is that there is no end. There is always more we could get. We'll never "arrive" at "enough."

The second disease, *Credit-itis*, is an illness that is brought on by the opportunity to buy now and pay later, and it feeds on our desire for instant gratification. Our economy today is built on the concept of credit-itis. Unfortunately, our national lack of self-discipline and allowed us to feed our affluenza, wreaking havoc in our personal and national finances.

The average amount spent at the cash register is around 125 percent higher if we use a credit card than if we pay cash, because it doesn't feel real when we use plastic instead of cash.

Credit-itis is not limited to purchases made with credit cards; it extends to car loans, mortgages, and other loans. The life of the average car loan and home mortgage continues to increase, while the average American's savings rate continues to decline.

There's a third thing, called a crappy economy — and the economy, too, has gone down in part from greed. The housing market was shattered first by a falsely-inflated market driven by real estate speculation, and then by all the sub-prime mortgages that could not be sustained and caused financial problems for individuals and corporations.

The job market is terrible for a whole variety of reasons: Companies shifting jobs overseas, capital being conserved rather than spent, and a government that can't seem to balance the budget because people want both programs *and* low taxes.

There Is a Spiritual Issue Beneath all of this.

When we say to ourselves why pay for it today when you can put it off until tomorrow, we are not trusting in God. We're trusting money to get us through, and money we don't even have. When individuals get greedy for stuff, we are focusing ourselves on things, rather than on relationships with God and others.

Our souls were created in the image of God, but they have been distorted. We were meant to desire God, but we have turned that desire toward possessions. We were meant to find our security in God, but we find it in amassing wealth. We were meant to love people, but instead we compete with them. We were meant to enjoy the simple pleasures of life, but we busy ourselves with pursuing money and things. We were

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meant to be generous and to share with those in need, but we selfishly hoard our resources for ourselves.

We need God's grace to rescue us from ourselves.

You've heard of the American Dream — The American Dream of everyone owning a home and having financial independence. Well, it's just not possible for many people.

Besides that, the American Dream is about stuff, not about relationships. Jesus, in his parable of the sower, said:

Luke 8:14 – "As for what fell among thorns, they are those who hear, but as they go on their way they are choked by the cares and riches and pleasures of life, and their fruit does not mature.

But there's an older dream than the American Dream. It's a dream that the Pilgrims brought with them to Massachusetts. It's the dream of the Baptist founders of Rhode Island, the Quaker founders of Pennsylvania, and many faith groups who came to this country seeking religious freedom.

That older dream is the dream of following the will of God.

Most of these religious movements that came to this country believed that they needed some elbow room to practice their religion. They believed that God had led them to what they called the New World (although it wasn't new to the Native Americans who lived here.)

These religious movements emphasized prayer, fasting, simplicity and frugality.

The Puritan Pilgrims of Massachusetts came in order to live a more Godly life. They believed that humankind existed for the glory of God, and that they could best give God glory if they were morally pure.

The Quakers, or Society of Friends, had a simple religious faith that was misunderstood and persecuted in England. They believed that God led people by an inner light, not mediated by the clergy. So when the Quaker William Penn founded a colony, it expressly welcomed people of all faiths.

The Faith answer to both Affluenza and Credititis is to take a page from our past, and seek that older dream. It is to seek God's kingdom, and strive to do God's will.

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Part of that older dream is the call to simplicity, which is simply to have fewer distractions from our commitment to God and the people and things God loves.

Simplicity means taking steps to silence the voices that tell us we need more and more.

Simplicity means living counter-culturally by living below, not above, our means.

Simplicity means pursuing good financial practices, so we deal with money in a straightforward way, and clearly *understand* what we're doing. If we don't understand what money is coming in, and what is going out, how can we live intentionally?

Simplicity means freeing ourselves from the debt that restricts our freedom to be who God wants us to be.

Simplicity means that when we use credit, we use it carefully and wisely.

Now you, personally, may not need to be told about simplicity. You may be in tune with that older dream of doing the will of God. But someone you know, maybe someone in your family, is caught up in the pursuit of material goods that we have come to call the American Dream. They need to hear the message about that dream of living God's kingdom.

When I first entered ministry, an older pastor told me how when he and his wife married, they lived off of his income, so that they have always saved up for their cars and paid cash. When he told me this, I wondered why he was telling me. I came to understand that he was trying to encourage me in the good habits of living simply, and saving money for what we want.

That's the kind of practical good news that we need to pass along to those we love.

Over the next several weeks, we'll focus on some practical things that help us live more faithfully and joyously, things that you can pass on to those who may be caught up in affluenza or credititis.

And I promise you that there is much more good news than bad news.

Amen.