



The narcotic of prosperity

It is well known to students of human societies that an increase in prosperity often brings with it a precipitous decline in religious involvement. As wealth increases, church attendance decreases. Ireland had one of the most religiously active populations in Europe until the so-called “Celtic tiger” years of the 1990s. Scandals among the Roman Catholic hierarchy did not help matters, but observers credit (or blame) the rising prosperity for the fall of the church. Across Europe countries that had experienced revivals of faith during the difficult years leading up to and following World War II saw faith recede during the increasing prosperity of the post-war era.

Sometimes the United States is seen to be an exception to this rule. We are a country that has experienced unprecedented prosperity and seen faith endure. But in recent years we have seen our own decline. And one wonders, what *kind* of faith does prosperity produce? Many of our popular preachers seem determined to help us be at peace with having faith in God along with faith in our own capacities for self protection and self fulfillment.

In his book *Tell It Slant* Eugene Peterson argues that “Money and machines anesthetize neediness. They put us in charge, in control. As long as the money holds out and the machines are in good repair, we don’t have to pray. But there is a steep price to pay. Narcotics diminish the capacity for personal relationships. Narcotics dull and finally destroy the capacity for living, feeling, loving enjoying. And praying.” Peterson’s words are in a discussion of a petition in the Lord’s Prayer: “Give us this day our daily bread.” His point is that when our daily bread seems secure there may not seem a need to pray. Why do I need God when I have a good job, secure investments, and a guaranteed pension? Perhaps God can take care of me when I die, but I don’t really need him now.

None of us would actually say that. But many of us live out those words. Our spiritual senses have been dulled by our prosperity. We are caught by the illusion that we control our destiny. We have sufficiently accumulated so that we need bigger barns. We refuse to recognize limits and are outraged when we encounter

them. It is sobering and frightening to be reminded that we are needy people. “Do we want to live without needs?” Peterson asks. “Then we want to live without God.” And to live without God, surrounded by our barns stuffed full is, as Jesus put it in his parable, to be a fool.

I am not saying that prosperity is bad. I am not saying that our current economic disaster is good. But I would remind all of us of the “deceitfulness of riches” and the wariness Jesus demonstrates about great possessions. I would remind us that those of us blessed with prosperity are required to live with greater discipline and attention to the narcotic effects of our success and concomitantly greater need of God. A time when retirement accounts are emptying, when jobs are disappearing, when financial markets are floundering is not a bad time to consider the simplicity of the Lord’s Prayer: “Give us today our daily bread.” It is not a bad time to remember that we do not live by bread alone but by every word from the mouth of God.

Like many of you I have had those panicky moments when I have wondered if everything is coming unglued. I sincerely hope that we survive this as a people. At such times it is the poor that suffer most. Those already at the margins are thrust into the abyss. I have no wish to see such suffering increased. But to the degree this shakes our confidence in ourselves, our governments, our markets, our academics, and our overweening conviction that we can manage the world on our own, it is a good thing. Perhaps we will recognize limits. Perhaps we will acknowledge our fragility and the fragility of our world. Perhaps we will repent of our greed. Perhaps we will live with humility, caution, frugality, and sensitivity to the plight of others. Perhaps we will have more faith in God and less faith in ourselves.

We work for prosperity. We work for the common good. It is good for us all to “sit under our own vine and fig tree.” But we work with a chastened recognition of limits and renewed faith in our good God who intends to make all things new. ■

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