



# The New England Church Pulpit

New England Congregational Church UCC  
Aurora Illinois

DARING TO DREAM, DREAMING TO DARE

October 30, 2016

Christianity  
Mark 10.46-52

*As Jesus and his disciples and a large crowd were leaving Jericho, Bartimaeus, a blind beggar, was sitting by the roadside. When he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to shout out and say, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" Many sternly ordered him to be quiet, but he cried out even more loudly, "Son of David, have mercy on me!" Jesus stood still and said, "Call him here." And they called the blind man, saying to him, "Take heart; get up, he is calling you."*

*So throwing off his cloak, he sprang up and came to Jesus. Then Jesus said to him, "What do you want me to do for you?" The blind man said to him, "My teacher, let me see again." Jesus said to him, "Go; your faith has made you well." Immediately he regained his sight and followed him on the way.*

Islam  
Qur'an 3.92

*You will not attain piety until you expend of what you love; and whatever thing you expend, God knows it.*

Hinduism  
Taittiriya Upanishad 1.11.3

*Whatever is given should be given with faith, not without faith—with joy, with modesty, with fear, with kindness.*

One of the most revealing letters of the sign of the times was one written a few years back to that sage counselor in our daily newspapers:

Dear Abby, I think my boyfriend ought to pay for half of my birth control pills, but I don't know him well enough to talk about money.

Most of us know very few people well enough to talk about personal money issues. Money is the last taboo in our culture, indicated by the uncomfortable if not rude response we would get if we asked "what did you pay for that?" or "how much money to you make?"

It is difficult to talk about money because money is so desperately important. In our society, money is the measure of our worth, our standing, our value and our power. That is not a bad thing at all; it is what it is. But that makes it decidedly difficult to talk about money in church because churches are thought to operate on a spiritual plane, where the services of the church are available to everyone at no cost.

But let's take a look at this from a different perspective today since we've come to ask for your financial support to underwrite the budget for the coming year in this church. Let's frame our discussion in the context of the Kingdom of God, the world as if God were in charge, a concept at the very heart of Jesus's mission. Here the last will be among the first; the poor will find entrance alongside the rich; the marginalized will be raised up and the haughty will be knocked down a peg or three. In God's economy, none are left out, not even the pagans. And that kind of countercultural world is bound to clash with the world as it usually operates as illustrated by the story of Bartimaeus.

When Jesus healed blind Bartimaeus, the kingdom of God collided with the common understanding of the day, namely that Bartimaeus was blind because God had turned a holy back on him for some bad deed. Jesus challenged that notion, and in causing Bartimaeus to see, he improved our insight into what all of this means. In his wild ecstasy Bartimaeus leapt from the ground, threw off his cloak and gave himself over to this kingdom that was colliding with an oppressive society that had kept him on the sidelines. And in throwing off his cloak, he gave up his most prized possession, for in those days leaving your cloak behind you was like leaving your Rolls Royce running and the doors wide open while you went to watch the Cubs win the World Series. The kingdom of God is founded on an economy that turns our priorities upside down, inside out, colliding with the accepted wisdom of the day with a force so powerful even a cloak as valuable as a Rolls Royce is chickenfeed.

The world as God would have it opens our eyes to accepted ways of doing things that are ultimately unacceptable. When PNC Ballpark, home of the Pittsburgh Pirates, was built in 2001 it was designed to look like the classic stadium it once was as Forbes Field in the 1950s. But there's one major difference: in the umpires' dressing room, there are two rooms. One side says: Umpire's Room, Men. The other side says, Umpires Room, Women. Now there were no female umpires in 2001, but the architects were not blind to the realization that there would someday be the need for two rooms. Here is insight into the way it should be.

There is in Atlanta, Georgia, a hospital by the name of Grady Memorial. It is built in the shape of an H, though it wasn't always that way. Some of the locals still call it by its original name, The Gradys, plural, for it was at one time two separate buildings, one for whites and one for blacks. But at some point in time in recent years hospital administration realized the collision course of the kingdom of God when old divisions would be challenged, so they built the connecting corridor in anticipation of the new world order where integration transcends the old way of seeing things. God's kingdom crashes against the value of a culture and bids it change.

The kingdom of God is about dreaming the future egalitarian society into being in the present, of engaging the oncoming collision of the world as God intends it into the current culture and welcoming the resulting crash against the established prejudices. It is about seeing with new eyes where we have been blind. It is about leaping up with joy and energy to embrace the new kingdom,

leaving our cloaks on the ground, our cars running because our values have changed.

We celebrate a God who comes to us in the tangible, in the concrete, in the physical stuff of life. We believe in a God who comes to us in a person, in Jesus, in our neighbor, in our teacher, in our enemy, in the birds and flowers and art and music and sports and science to give us sight in body, mind and spirit. We believe in a God who comes to us in the money we earn in order to make the world a better place for everyone.

And the way we move our money and stuff around and share it is a manifestation of our faith. We do not have a spirituality that floats in some ethereal manner; our faith is deeply rooted in things, firmly planted in the physical objects that bring us pleasure and allow us to reach out for the pleasure of others, where everyone is able to earn enough money to buy food and provide affordable housing for their families. It isn't the money that is eschewed by people of faith but the way we blindly hoard that money for selfish purposes. We delight in money that is spent to create dressing rooms for a future that is not yet here and bridges to connect segregated twin towers in hospitals.

New England Church is building a bridge while we're walking on it, right here, right now. We're making it up as we go along. For 158 years, we've been laying one brick at a time, one pylon at a time before we take the next step. And the bridge that has brought us from the past to the present has been carefully designed by faith to accommodate a world that is ever changing. We don't have to bridge the chasm between slave and free as did our ancestors in this church who were part of the Underground Railroad. And we can walk across the bridge our ancestors built when they gave women the right to vote in this church in 1858. Those bridges are as solid today as when they were built.

But we can't rest on those bridges and call ourselves the body of Christ. We must forever be building new bridges, dreaming new dreams, daring new adventures in faithful living. To do this we must be able to talk about money and the vital role it plays in giving vision to a future that can be seen by everyone. Amen.

--Gary L. McCann

(This sermon is based on a sermon "Investment Strategies for Unrighteous Mammon," preached by the Rev. Dr. Thomas Long at the Festival of Homiletics, Atlanta, GA, 2009)

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## PASTORAL PRAYER

God of life, so far beyond us that we cannot comprehend you yet so deep within us that we cannot escape you, make yourself real to us today. In this discombobulated world we seek stability; in this noisy world we seek peace; in this fearful world we seek courage; and in this world of empires that rise and fall, we crave a vision of your eternal kingdom where the sun never sets and love wins the day.

Seek us out, every one, in the special circumstances and needs that each soul faces. Young and old we come; the merry-hearted and the bereaved; families together and solitary souls, some of us tempted to be proud of the world's prizes and some crestfallen because of failure, some strong in body and others striving to keep the inward spirit alive while the outward flesh perishes. Meet us in this place that we may leave with joy having met you here.

We pray for the world today, so riddled by violence and warmongering that it's difficult to repress our fear and cynicism. Arrest the evil forces that withstand good will and vile atrocities. Our prayers rise for those seeking disarmament and peace, for all nations where justice and hope are priorities, and for the leaders of our own country, from the president downward that policies of liberty and justice for all may prove worthy of the stewardship of opportunity entrusted to us.

And in this time of stewardship here at New England Church, we pray for discerning minds and generous hearts that we may continue to be ministers of peace and joy in this place and time. We are grateful for all those in the past who have sacrificed to give us this beautiful building, a welcoming congregation, and most importantly an undying spirit of generosity for those who are in need of life's basic necessities. May we not undermine their investment by squandering what has been given to us.

Be with us as we travel by faith across the bridges you have inspired, in the name of the Christ we pray, Amen.