

Sermon 3-08-09—"It's Turnaround Time."

This past Monday I was finally getting around to reading the Sunday papers when my eye caught a headline in the Business section of the Post of an article by Michelle Singletary, whose financial advice I read sometimes for its good conversational style. The headline was "Hey, Bailout Snivelers: Hush!"

She might have been describing anyone of us who may have had some of the same thoughts. Singletary is getting many letters whose, as she put it, sniveling sentiments come down to one question, "What about me?" They're talking about the frustration of seeing the government planning to bail out people who made what now turn out to be foolish decisions about the mortgages they took out, while many others who met the obligations they agreed to don't have any special reward for that.

That's an understandable sentiment for those who believe in personal responsibility, as I guess that we all do. A lot—although not by any means all—of the people in trouble in this economy made choices that ended up being bad ones that cost them their homes, and rue the times when they could have saved money when the times were good, and now they're in the draft of the wretched downturn in the financial world. As President Obama said, "we have lived through an era where, too often, short term gains were prized over long-term prosperity."

But Singletary says she's getting weary of those carping about the fact that they're not getting a piece of the multibillion dollar debt that the federal government is amassing trying to dam up the economic mudslide, She says these people deserve a pat on the

back for their frugality, but now they are suffering from “WAM Syndrome” or the “What about me?” disease. Children have that WAM syndrome—I know from the way I complained about my brothers getting bikes earlier than I did, and bigger allowances than I did just because the depression was ending and there was some discretionary money at home. I had it too.

Of course a classic carrier of WAM Syndrome, “What about me?” was the elder son in the story of the Forgiving Father, otherwise known as the story of the Prodigal Son. The father has a big celebration when the prodigal comes to his senses and realizes he’s better off at home, but the elder brother can hardly stand to be part of it. He had stayed at home helping out, with no big feast for that, suffering as he was with WAM Syndrome. However in the long run, as the father points out, both brothers had a claim on the father’s love. They all have the same starting point for a new relationship, discovering in a new way how to live together. This is a classic for these times, for all times.

So how does that family discussion connect with what we heard this morning in our Gospel reading about friends talking with friends? Here’s something you could only say to a really good friend, Jesus to Peter saying, “Hey, get behind me Satan!”

That’s what Peter got hit with after his outburst to Jesus, one of his many impulsive outbursts, as we all know. Jesus had just told the disciples that he now knew, at this point in his ministry, that he was going to suffer and be killed. He also told them that he was going to rise again, but they missed that point. They were too alarmed that he was predicting his own death.

So Peter did something that surprises us as we read it today. Peter rebukes Jesus, not the other way around. The disciples had grown so close together that Peter, headstrong as he was anyway, could do that with one he had grown so close to. I can just imagine him saying, as a sort of leader of the pack, “you need to change your attitude. Talking gloom and doom in these hard times is bad for you and bad for the group.”

But Jesus knew what he was saying, and his response was “get behind me, you devil.” They cared about each other enough to call each other out. Jesus says, “Peter, I’ve been counting on you, but you’re setting your mind not on divine things but on human things” Or as we might put it today, “Shut up already. You’re missing the point, you just don’t get it.”

We can look back in bible history and know now what it took to change Peter, who was so set in his linear thinking about life that he could seldom grasp Jesus’ use of paradoxes to express seemingly self-contradictory propositions about life. Nor could he even understand then the sheer paradox of Jesus’ life itself, the story of the one who, though a suffering servant of God, was revealed finally to be the King of Kings and Lord of all. Remember, Peter lied on the night before Jesus’ death that he even knew Jesus. It was only after he discovered the risen Christ’s presence alive in the world after the crucifixion, that he became the historic leader of the Church that we remember today.

Jesus as a paradox himself, whose teaching is so full of paradox, is captured in books like “Slave of All—Paradox of authority and servanthood in the Gospel of Mark.” Listen again to Jesus

paradoxical words from Mark this morning, echoed also in both Matthew and Luke's accounts: "For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake and the sake of the Gospel will save it. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life?"

C.S. Lewis, the author of "Screwtape Letters" we talked about last Sunday, is said to have referred to these two verses from Mark's Gospel more than any other quotations from scripture—that if you try to save life and success of achievement by greed and pleasure, you will lose eternal life and a life that's really worth eternalizing and living right now, losing your life in the service of others, you will gain life.

It's time for us to reclaim those eternal truths in the world we're living in today. We're hearing plenty about company bailouts these days, but now it's time for us to think about turnarounds—especially in the way we think and plan. Gradually CEOs of huge corporations are beginning to acknowledge that a lot of old things aren't working now in business and they're beginning to be ready for the turnaround of cleansing, healing, freeing, old-fashioned work of really serving the needs of others.

In today's economy, both the prodigal neophyte and the elder cautious conservative have something to lose if they don't share in the changes in what's happening now, so that they can share in the hope of something to gain if they learn to work together.

If you think about it, maybe this is a time for all of us to restructure our own personal and public lives. First, we need to choose to lose our old ways of thinking. Then the planet becomes a trust

from God and other people become our brothers and sisters and our goal becomes God's way of operation rather than business as usual.

But those turnarounds in our thinking don't happen overnight. They take commitment and discipline over the long haul. There's no quick way out for AIG or the auto manufacturers, and there isn't for our country or for us. It will take living the prodigal's turnaround life- the way of repentance- day by day, focusing on what really are the basics of a hope-filled life, closer to needs and demands that matter most in a larger life, and determined to spread the word about that way of life.

Sometimes stories tell it the best. We have all been living "high on the hog" for a long time. Satan finally catches us and we arrive in Hell, only to be given chopsticks four feet long to eat our food. Everyone is literally dying of starvation until one renegade outwits Satan and discovers what will change everything. It was simple, once people quieted down to listen and try a new way. Each one quit frantically trying to feed himself and learned how to turn around and use the four-foot-long chopsticks to feed the person next to him.

If practicing that lesson on sharing and serving begins to cure you of "What About Me?" syndrome you won't have to live in Hell much longer. And if that lesson on learning in a new way how to find life by losing your life in sharing and serving, you will have discovered the key to a larger life that is worth eternalizing!

For that I say, A- MEN!