

**THE CALL TO DISCIPLESHIP:
REAL SECURITY AND THE GAMBLING QUESTION
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We're into a sermon series on discipleship. The idea comes from the summer Gospel readings that tell how Jesus travels from Galilee to Jerusalem teaching as he goes.

On eighteen occasions Jesus teaches his disciples what it means to be his follower. Each time he addresses some new topic.

In the first sermon we talked about the cost of discipleship. Last week we considered prayer. Today I want to reflect on Jesus' teaching about material possessions and say a few things about the proposed casino gambling in Western New York.

The fact that Luke includes this parable about the rich fool in his gospel is a good indicator that the early church was struggling with the issue of greed. We live in a consumer culture. Americans are obsessed with acquiring things and having the right possessions. We use material worth to measure the value and worth of people.

But we are not the only ones ever to have worshipped the god of money. Early Christians also struggled with questions like – how much is enough? What is my responsibility to those who have little or nothing? What is the difference between making a legitimate profit and greed?

Our region is debating again about whether to allow casino gambling. The Governor, the Mayor and local developers want gambling legalized. They see it as a remedy for economic malaise. It will mean new jobs, new construction, and Buffalo as a major destination they say. But this decision is not about whether we want an economic revival in Buffalo. Of course we do. Nor is it even first a question of how to achieve such a revival. There are several solid proposals on the table. What this issue is really about is do we want to build the future of our community on an industry that sells a lie: you can find your security in money.

Deputy Assembly speaker Arthur Eve comes on a little strong sometimes. But I loved the Jesus buttons and baseball cap with Jesus across the front that he was wearing at the news conference at which he condemned casino gambling last week.

Assemblyman Eve is right. Jesus would not approve of gambling. Nor, I would like to add, would Jesus approve of a society that builds its commerce on the premise that you can find happiness and security in money and things.

If that is not the premise gambling is built upon how do its proponents explain the seductive power and attraction of gambling? When the New York State Lotto exceeds fifty or sixty million dollars what is the frenzy of buying tickets about? Surely not providing more proceeds for all the good things the state's portion of the ticket sales go toward. No! The message is "Hit the lotto and your worries are over. Easy street, fancy cars, exotic vacations, leisurely living." The fact is we live in a society that equates personal security and happiness with material possessions and net worth.

That's what Jesus saw in the man's eyes who wanted him to settle the family dispute. This man, like a spoiled child who had his toy taken in the sandbox, wants Jesus to upbraid his brother. Rabbis, like parents, often settled family squabbles.

But Jesus knows this family feud is not about who gets the grandfather clock.

It is about *having* things, *owning* things, *feathering* his nest with more stuff.

So Jesus cuts to the chase. Let's not pretend we're talking rights, let's get right to the issue. It's greed. "Who set me to be a judge or arbitrator over you? Take care!" Jesus warns. "Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one's life does not consist in an abundance of possessions."

I like the way Jesus goes to the heart of the issue. Disarms the man's defensiveness. Touches the place where the man is in pain. Like a gentle physician holding a sprained or broken limb asking the patient, does this hurt?

I am convinced that if Jesus were in Buffalo today and someone asked him whether it would be better to have a city with jobs-for-all-and-gambling or no gambling and unemployment he would not be dragged into a debate over economic revival. That's not what the gambling issue is about he would tell us. Gambling is about greed he would say looking in our eyes, calling our bluff.

So if our security is not to be found in our Paine Webber portfolios then where is it to be found? Jesus' story about the rich fool has some answers.

Soil, sun, and crops conspire to provide this man with a bumper crop. Like buying Microsoft fifteen years ago. You discover you are rich. So the man starts to fantasize. What shall I do with all this wealth? His conclusion? Hoard it. Tear down old barns, build new bigger barns. Like a friend who came into a windfall, tore down his old two-car garage, built a new four-car structure for the new toys he planned to purchase. "Relax," says the rich fool to himself "for I have ample goods laid up for many years to come."

I had a version of this discussion with someone the other day. The question we agreed is to have enough resources for retirement. To lay up enough goods so that retirement can be a time to eat, drink and be merry. Going when and where you please. Frequenting nice restaurants. Not worrying about not having enough.

It is important to note that the rich man is not a criminal. There is nothing here of graft or theft. No mention of treating workers poorly. Rather he is careful and conservative. Comes by his wealth honestly. Although you'd expect more gratitude for the One who sent the rain and sun to grow his crops. So if the man is not unjust what is he? A fool, says Jesus.

He lives for himself, talks to himself, plans for himself, congratulates himself. Kind of the way I was envisioning my retirement the other day. All about what I wanted, when I wanted it because I've earned it and I deserve it and it's all mine.

Old-timers in Manchester, Vermont remember Robert Todd Lincoln who lived there at the turn of the century. The son of the president was self-centered. Not the most likeable person in town. "All Todd and no Lincoln" is the way those taciturn Vermonters put it.

So too the rich man in Jesus' parable was full of himself and his fantasies. Truth be told, we North Americans have a way of being full of ourselves.

When you are full of yourself you don't think about God or others. You become pre-occupied with yourself. Your possessions possess you. God is displaced from your life.

The Romans had a proverb. Money is like sea-water. The more you drink the more you want. You consume and consume and consume until you explode.

I was recently talking with someone who just returned from visiting India. A place that has little resources and much of the world's population. 20% of the world's people and 4% of the world's water for example. "Makes you wonder when you re-enter this society," she said. "Being grateful for what we have is not what I mean. Living like we did for a time in a society that doesn't have enough water to wash or cook or quench one's thirst I find our obsession with drinking 8 glasses of water a day obscene."

Let me shift back to the gambling question. It is the local symptom of a larger societal disease – materialism. It manifests itself differently in different communities depending on the degree of affluence or desperation. I am gravely concerned. What the Governor, Mayor, and some of the Seneca leaders are holding out to us is a quick-fix. Like a vial for a crack addict. Or a syringe for a heroin user. The political leadership at the highest levels of our city and state, at least on this issue, is morally bankrupt and economically blind.

Sam Hoyt has documented from studies and research that a stand-alone casino – a one stop entertainment and dining center – will cause surrounding businesses to fold. It will mean the gradual death of this city he says. Ask the mayor of Atlantic City. He recently said, "ten years ago we were a slum by the ocean, today we are a slum by the ocean with five casinos."

The social cost is astronomical. Suicides, divorce, crime all escalate according to study after study after study. Not to mention the question of preying on low-income residents for limited dollars. "They see this as a way to get rich and to be lucky. To get out of a bad situation in which they find themselves," said Eve commenting on a national report. "It is very enticing for people who do not have much to begin with. The lower the level of your income, the more you participate."¹

Maybe Buffalo is like that desperate, low-income resident trying to find a way out of hard times. Putting the future of Buffalo in the hands of those who want casino gambling is like giving our unemployment check to the clerk at the convenience store for lotto tickets.

The fact that we would seriously entertain such a discussion suggests desperation and a shaky sense of security. But ultimately that is not the heart of this great city.

If ever there was an issue of social justice and morality the church can and should speak out on with authority and conviction this is it folks!

Our Session will offer some tangible ways for Westminster to respond come fall. In the meantime, there is nothing stopping you from writing Mr. Pataki or Mr. Masiello a friendly but very serious letter about their proposal.

What they have in mind will not only directly affect you and me. It will dramatically shape the kind of community in which Sara and Anna Hobler and all of our children will be raised.

The Hobler girls aren't old enough to vote. They haven't learned how to write letters yet. Or make calls. Or put pressure on powerful people.

Like it or not the responsibility to act on their behalf rests on your shoulders and my shoulders. That's what our baptismal pledge to them was about.

I know it's summer. But I challenge you this week to take time to send an email or compose a letter. Make sure you have enough time to find the right verbs and metaphors to describe your outrage and dismay.

Remind the Governor and the Mayor that you vote. Remind them that you care for this city. And remind them what Jesus said, "be on guard against all kinds of greed for life does not consist in the abundance of possessions nor, if I may add to Luke's Gospel, in the illusion of such possessions."

Now come to the table. Let us break bread with the one another and with the one who is the source of our true security. Amen.

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ⁱ Emma D. Sapong, "Eve mounts crusade to fend off casinos," The Buffalo News, August 3, 2001 front page.