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The Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost

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5 Keep your lives free from the love of money, and be content with what you have, for he himself has said, "I will never leave you or forsake you." 6 So we can say with confidence, "The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can anyone do to me?"

— Hebrews 13:5-6

So much of the Christian life—and really life in general—rests ultimately on what we truly love. Not on what we say we love, but on what we actually love. We know what we're supposed to love: God, our families, the church. Maybe even our enemies for some extra credit. But what do our lives show about what we truly love? Or, to put it another way, when push comes to shove, what are the commitments, goals, things, persons that guide our choices? That determine how we allocate our time, our money, and our energy? What truly are our deepest commitments?

The early Christian bishop and theologian Augustine of Hippo felt that this question—What are our deepest commitments? What truly do we love?—was critically important not just for Christians but for all human beings. Augustine looked around at the people living in his town and said to himself, "All these people want to be happy, but most are not living a joyful life. For the most part, they're plagued by concerns, anxieties, and stress, and while they desire happiness, their lives are constantly getting bogged down in frustrations, petty conflicts, unfulfilled wishes, and the emotional wear-and-tear of everyday existence." In short, Augustine concluded, everyone wants to live a life marked by happiness and joy, but very few people actually do so.

While Augustine lived centuries ago, I think his insights apply quite well to our context here in 21st-century America: just imagine if you asked your neighbor "how's life going?" How many of your neighbors do you think would respond, "I am deeply happy with life!" or "My existence is joyous!"? No, almost no one would respond like this. You're much more likely to hear: "Well, you know gas is still above \$4.", or "It would be better if we could get some rain around here.", or "The Red Sox are in last place, so..."

Our lives generally-speaking tend not to be marked by happiness and joy but often by a kind of creeping malaise, a low-

grade tiredness and discontent, that spreads over the surface of life like a destructive flow of lava, gradually hardening and encrusting us in an emotional shell of mild dissatisfaction and a hard-to-describe feeling that we're just not quite living life as fully or as joyfully as it was meant to be.

So what do we do about this? How can we address this mild malaise and unsettling sense of discontent? St. Augustine and our passage from Hebrews this morning speak directly to this challenging reality by offering a diagnosis of the problem, a description of how the problem embeds itself in our lives, and finally a bold direction out of the malaise and towards greater joy. A diagnosis, a description, and finally a helpful direction.

First, the diagnosis: what's causing our discontent? What's blocking us from experiencing the deep joy and fulfillment that we all naturally long for? Augustine famously and brilliantly argues that at its root this malaise stems from what he calls "disordered love." Our lives, Augustine explains, are organized according to what we truly love. Not what we think we love, or even what we say we love, but what we actually love, as expressed by our priorities, our non-negotiable commitments: the decisions we make practically about how we allocate our resources of time, wealth, personal skills, physical and mental energy, and so forth. Augustine reasons that we humans have a tendency to organize these priorities—these "loves"—in ways that are out-of-sync with how they should be ordered, with what truly matters. And this gap between rightly ordered loves and our wrongly ordered priorities feeds our deep sense of discontent.

So first of all, according to Augustine, the diagnosis of our problem is that we have "disordered love," loves or priorities that are out of order. But then second, how might Augustine describe this problem? How might he flesh it out? In order to describe more fully this struggle that tends to afflict most, if not all, of us, let's consider two common, contemporary examples:

The first occurs quite regularly for me on Sundays each and every fall. (If you don't already realize this, you will soon come to see that I am still very much a work in progress.) Shoko (my wife) and I are in the car. We're driving home from church, inching our way through Cambridge traffic. I have one eye on the road in front of us, and the other eye on the dashboard clock. As the minutes pass and the traffic barely moves, I get more and more

fidgety and anxious, more and more aggressive in my driving choices, less likely to give pedestrians the right of way, and more likely to blow my horn and cut people off. Finally, Shoko turns to me and with the perfect sweetness only a long-suffering wife can express, she says, “What is your problem?”

And naturally I respond with utmost seriousness, “Shoko, you do not understand. Kickoff of the Patriots game is literally in three minutes, and we are at least four minutes from home. I need—NEED—somehow to make up a minute in gridlocked Cambridge Sunday traffic.”

Every fall I’m thus reminded that I have a disordered love. My need to catch each and every second of the Patriots game is clearly out of proportion to the actual value of the match. My anxious and erratic driving in order to not miss a second of a sporting event clearly suggests that my priorities are, to use a technical, spiritual phrase, “out of whack.”

A second example of a disordered love can be seen in this morning’s reading from Hebrews. In Hebrews 13:5, the author writes directly, “Keep your lives free from the love of money, and be content with what you have.” In other words, money is a major source of disordered love. Many of us have a tough time putting money in its proper place in our lives and not growing inordinately attracted to it. Jack Benny’s famous skit is a perfect example of this: In the skit, a robber approaches Benny, flashes a gun, and presents him with a stark set of options: “Your money or your life.” Benny then pauses to reflect on the choices before him. The robber, getting frustrated, repeats his demand more forcefully: “Your money or your life!” Benny then begins to grow a little perplexed about how to decide between these two attractive options, and finally blurts out: “I’m thinking it over!”

This is a classic example of a disordered love of money. Now the skit is humorous because we think of course no one would be so foolish as to actually value money more than life itself. But even though very few people would literally consider losing their life for their money, nevertheless ironically our tendency to love money is one of the strongest forces preventing us from living most fully, most deeply, and most joyfully. Although no one would consider dying for their money, ironically it is love of money that tends to rob us of the fullness of life itself.

Whether it’s an inordinate, excessive love of football, money,

or some other created thing, the problem is not the thing itself. Obviously, the point is not that football is inherently evil. Rather the problem comes in when we incorrectly value a certain aspect of our lives, when we elevate something of limited value to a position of ultimate value, or especially when we treat created, limited things as if they were eternal, divine, godly things. In short, when we give to any earthly thing the time, attention, or value that truly belongs to God alone. Now examples like money and football are pretty obviously disordered loves because they clearly should not receive the ultimate value that God alone deserves from us. It becomes more difficult for us to order our loves correctly when the issue is not football but our closest relationships, our loved ones, our friends, our beloved pets, perhaps our vocations and careers—all those many aspects of life which are deeply good and deserving of our love and attention, but are not God and therefore do not deserve our ultimate love and value.

So if the diagnosis of our problem is having disordered love, and if we might describe disordered love as an excessive or inordinate love of created things—giving earthly things the place in our hearts that rightfully belongs only to God—then how do we get our loves, our priorities, back into a healthy, life-giving order? How do we fix the imbalances in our values which undermine the joy our lives might know? How can we reclaim this joy, rightly ordering our loves and letting God have central place in our hearts?

Thankfully, our passage from Hebrews clearly points a direction forward. Importantly, and interestingly, Hebrews' strategy for dealing with a disordered love—specifically in this case the love of money—is very telling: after writing “keep your lives free from the love of money,” the author does not say: “and so to do so, suppress that desire, eliminate it, erase it by diligently scrubbing financial daydreams from your hearts.” No, rather the author simply and quickly shifts our attention to what really matters, as he recalls the words of God in the Psalms: “I will never leave you or forsake you.” And as he remembers and reflects on God's promises: “The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can anyone do to me?”

In other words, the author of Hebrews deals with disordered loves like you might deal with an annoying younger sibling. Let's call him Bobby. Bobby (aka disordered love of money, or family

members, or job, or pets, or entertainment, or any other earthly thing) comes up to you, and like an annoying little brother starts poking you and prodding you. Little Bobby just wants your attention; he just wants to get under your skin and distract your gaze from everything that is more important—particularly from God. The author of Hebrews says, “don’t engage little Bobby”; he’s just looking for attention, and by giving him attention you just end up feeding that need all the more, creating a bigger problem in the long run. So don’t respond to that annoying sibling, that disordered love clamoring for you to engage; instead, as the Hebrews’ author writes just one chapter earlier (in Heb. 12:2): “let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith.” Let us turn our attention to the One who really matters, the only One who truly deserves our ultimate love, value, and attention, the only One who deserves the place of central importance in our hearts and our lives.

When we do so, our lives begin gradually to become rightly ordered. And this does not mean that suddenly there are no problems in life, or that we transform overnight into joyfully glowing individuals, but by giving God God’s rightful place, we begin to reconnect with who God is and how God wants to helpfully move through our lives. As Hebrews reminds us: God says, “I will never leave you or forsake you.” So we can say with confidence, “The Lord is—right now—my helper; I will not be afraid.”

Disordered love, from overvaluing family members to excessively loving football, disconnects us from our life-giving God. But when we let God be God, when we love God first above all, we begin reconnecting to these promises: God never leaving us, God helping us, God freeing us from fear through a peace that passes understanding. So may we surrender to the God who loves us, loving God above all, not in empty words, but practically in our actual priorities and our allocation of the time and resources entrusted to us. Doing so, may we enjoy a new-found freedom from the anxious malaise that plagues a life of disordered loves. And may we instead experience at new depths our God’s love for us, enjoying the freedom, peace, and even the joy of a life rightly ordered, a life which loves God above all.

In the Name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

