

ARE YOU MAKING A LIVING OR MAKING A DYING?

Have you ever been to FOXWOODS casino? I've only been there ONCE, probably a DECADE ago, but the place made me physically ILL -- and it WASN'T just the SMOKE. I just cannot BELIEVE that people actually GO there, and GIVE their hard-earned MONEY to the place. To ME, it's just so PLASTIC and ARTIFICIAL, and such an OBVIOUS rip-off! Yet, AS I looked around, EVERYONE seemed SO intent, and even PRAYERFUL, like it was a RELIGIOUS experience! And I thought to myself: *IF God hears ALL prayers, then just the prayers from Foxwoods must keep God VERY busy!*

THEN I thought to myself: *I HAVE to find out WHY this place is such a DRAW!* So I went to a money-changer, got myself \$5 worth of quarters, & went to a quarter machine. Well, in less than 2 minutes, I had lost EVERY quarter, and IN the process, I actually became ILL, so that I could not WAIT to LEAVE. But AS I was leaving, I thought of the HEBREWS in our Scripture Lesson, DANCING around that golden CALF! And I thought: *Gee, those HEBREWS were SO American!* Here, they'd experienced miracle after miracle at the hand of GOD! They'd been DELIVERED from SLAVERY in Egypt and given their FREEDOM! They'd received MULTITUDES of BLESSINGS! And YET, they wanted MORE! WHEN would they have ENOUGH?

The gold EARRINGS and RINGS that they hand over to AARON are part of the "BOOTY" that they gathered while fleeing EGYPT. But instead of SAVING all that gold for the FUTURE -- for TRADING, and for becoming established in the land of promise -- THEY create a "GOD" out of it -- an IDOL -- a THING that would supposedly keep them SAFE and give them COMFORT and CONTROL in the wilderness of the SINAI desert. And THEN, they make SACRIFICES to the GOLDEN calf, BLOOD sacrifices! And they have a PARTY! And FINALLY, it says: they "ROSE up to REVEL," which is the Bible's DISCREET way of saying that they have a WILD, CULTIC, SEXUAL ORGY!

Well friends: I hate to SAY it, but golden CALVES are as MUCH in fashion TODAY as they were in the Sinai DESERT. And FOXWOODS is just ONE of the MANY golden calves that WE have created! ALL we have to DO is look at the current FINANCIAL situation to see MORE golden calves. Mary NELSON said this week: *Wall Street is now in a shambles, worldwide confidence is eroded, the stock market is in free-fall, and many people are losing homes and jobs. Many had put ALL their confidence in the "freedom-from-regulation" MARKETPLACE, and its self-correcting ACTIONS. But NOW, we see that THIS approach just led the way to wanton GREED and misplaced CONFIDENCE, and we're ALL suffering the RESULTS. It reminds me of Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall, Humpty Dumpty had a great fall ... And all the king's horses and all the king's men couldn't put Humpty back TOGETHER again.*

Yes, WE are a LOT like those HEBREWS -- ALL too WILLING to pour our God-given gifts into some THING (or THINGS) that WE think will keep us SAFE, and give us COMFORT and CONTROL. And like AARON, we TOO find it easy to DISGUISE our idols, and PRETEND that they are perfectly LEGITIMATE ways of achieving JOY and FULFILLMENT. But Mary Nelson is correct when she says: *At best, Humpty Dumpty has been SHATTERED, and WE will have to carve out a NEW course. It's so EASY to LEGITIMIZE what we've BEEN doing, isn't it?*

Take, for example, our CAREERS. There is nothing WRONG with striving for EXCELLENCE and ADVANCEMENT! EVERYONE has to make a LIVING in order to SURVIVE. But the REAL question is: *WHAT does it MEAN to make a LIVING?* To ME, it needs to entail MORE than just working 60 or 70 hours a week. It needs to entail MORE than just the *cutthroat, cut-rate, win-at-any-cost* philosophy that so MANY American companies, and consequently employees, seem to be

THRIVING on these days. And WHAT do we CALL it when someone wins a big CONTRACT, or makes LOTS of money? WE say: *they're MAKING a KILLING!* Interesting PHRASE, isn't it? But, we TALK about it like it's a GOOD thing! My FATHER used to say it all the time: *THAT guy's making a KILLING!* And we get impressed and enthralled and inspired by the HOUSES that some people LIVE in and the CARS some people DRIVE! However, the BIBLE is CLEAR! THOSE who **make MAKING a LIVING** into *making a KILLING* will ONE day have to face a PAINFUL truth. They will REALIZE that, instead of *making a LIVING*, they've actually been *making a DYING*.

That phrase, *making a dying*, comes from a book, *Your Money or Your Life* (New York: Penguin, 1992). And IN it, the authors note how, once upon a time, earning a living was a **MEANS** to an **END**. The MEANS was *earning* and the END was *living*. But for too MANY in America these past few decades, the EARNING seems to have become an **END** in itself. It's what life is ABOUT! It's how too MANY of us find FULFILLMENT! But DON'T you SEE: it becomes a **SICKNESS** -- it becomes a DISEASE --when the MEANS becomes the **END**! We USED to call it **MATERIALISM**! NOW, we call it **AFFLUENZA**. And it's simply *looking for INNER fulfillment in OUTER possessions*. And it's the notion that *DISCOMFORT can be alleviated by something EXTERNAL: a baby's bottle, a vacation, a BMW, a master's degree, fine jewelry....* And in America for DECADES, the pursuit of success and wealth, THINGS and power, has become nothing LESS than a socially-approved, even socially-promoted, ADDICTION! And like ALL addictions, the stronger it grows, the MORE it eats away at the REST of our lives, AND at the very FABRIC of our society.

We ALWAYS think that *MORE is BETTER*! Well, NO one has better-expressed the **catch-22** of the *more is better* philosophy than a man named Paul Wachtel, who said: *IF more is better, then there can never be a sense of ENOUGH, no matter how much MORE one attains, for there is ALWAYS more NEEDED to make life BETTER*. He writes in his book, *The Poverty of Affluence*:

"In 1958, when economist, John Kenneth Galbraith, appropriately described the United States as the 'Affluent Society,' 9.5% of U. S. households had air conditioning, about 4% had dishwashers, and fewer than 15% had more than one CAR. By 1980, when Ronald Reagan's successful bid to replace Jimmy Carter was based on the widespread sense that people were SUFFERING economically, the percentage of homes with air-conditioning had quintupled, the percentage with dishwashers had increased more than 700 percent, and the percentage with two or more cars had about tripled. Yet, DESPITE this astounding economic growth -- DESPITE owning more of the gadgets, machines and appliances thought to constitute 'the good life' -- Americans felt significantly LESS well-off than they had 22 years before...."

And friends, don't you see? In the 28 years SINCE 1980, these statistics have JUMPED off the MAP! LOOK at everything we HAVE today, and at what WE consider to be *NORMAL and necessary and expected*. But, DON'T you see what's HAPPENING? It's EXACTLY like what happens to those rebellious Hebrews, who create the golden calf. Their WORSHIP of God, and THEN of the CALF, quickly DETERIORATES. SO, they go from sacrificing to it, to feasting around it, to having an outright ORGY in front of it. Do you see the VALUES of society DISINTEGRATING! And the needs of others, as well as the good of the community itself, get LOST in this frenzy of mindless self-pleasure and self-absorption. And isn't THAT what's been happening in America? Haven't OUR values been DISINTEGRATING? And ISN'T our current financial crisis just a SYMPTOM of it? I think so!

Did you know that in 1900, there were fewer than 300 products for Americans to buy? TODAY, there are literally MILLIONS! And therefore, the average American *NOW spends about 9% of his or her non-working, non-sleeping hours gathering information about various PRODUCTS*. Friends, that's FAR more time every day than the average couple spends communicating with each other or the average parents spend PLAYING with their kids. That's 950 HOURS per family per year gathering information about things to

BUY (Earth Island Journal, 8 [Spring 1993]. And THAT'S an OLD statistic! And things haven't gotten any BETTER. No WONDER some people SAY that we have MORTGAGED our children's SOULS to ACQUIRE more and more STUFF. Let's FACE it: we're practically DROWNING in STUFF! And our credit cards are MAXED out! But we OWE, we OWE, so off to work we GO! But it's been a LONG time since we've ASKED ourselves: *what VALUES are we passing on?* And what HAPPENS when TOO many people OWE too much MONEY? Well, I THINK we're about to find out!

Do you know WHO commands the highest salaries in our society today, just for doing their **job**? Well, it's NOT the CEO's of multinationals, though their salaries ARE outrageous! And it's NOT the politicians, who keep the machinery of government grinding (however slowly & inefficiently WE think it grinds). It's NOT the doctors and counselors to whom we trust our physical and mental well-being. And it's CERTAINLY not educators, whom we charge with NURTURING our children. No, the HIGHEST paid people in our society today are ENTERTAINERS. There's a good REASON why we call them *American IDOLS*. What SHOULD be a bit of FUN, decorating our days and adding a little enjoyment to life, has become the central FOCUS of our lives. It's become what we HONOR most: ball players, movie stars and singers. Like those Hebrews, you see, WE want to be ENTERTAINED by the IDOLS that WE have created, instead of being ENGAGED by a God who DEMANDS that we be in committed and covenanted RELATIONSHIPS with GOD, with our fellow human beings, and with creation itself.

Friends, in our Gospel lesson today, Jesus compares being in a RIGHT relationship with GOD and others (or being part of God's kingdom) with attending a WEDDING feast. And I wonder: how MANY of us are just SO caught UP in serving our various IDOLS that we cannot be BOTHERED to respond to God's invitation? LIKE those thankless, would-be wedding guests, we are just TOO BUSY to attend GOD'S party, BUSY with our IDOLS – sports and entertainment, WORK and all our STUFF! However, LOOK at the parable! Those who REJECT God's invitation to tend to their OWN affairs are **making a DYING**! One group even literally **makes a killing** (Matthew 22:6). And what happens? Turning down the chance to PARTY, to **live it UP** in GOD'S kingdom, results in a NEW guest list – and an UNEXPECTED assortment of people!

Well, the MESSAGE is CLEAR: GOD'S party, God's kingdom, goes ON, whether or not YOU and I show up! IF we would rather PLAY with our IDOLS, that's OK! GOD has given us the gift of FREE-WILL. It's OUR choice! But WITH or without us, God's PARTY goes ON. And it's GOD'S party, GOD'S kingdom, that offers us the **fullness of LIFE** that we all YEARN for, because THAT is found in GOOD, life-giving, DEEP, committed RELATIONSHIPS: with God, with others, and with creation. SO, like the Hebrews (AND the Egyptians), like the early Christians (AND the Romans), WE have a CHOICE! Will we **make a LIVING**, and live GOD'S way, by God's values? OR, will we **make a DYING**, too BUSY worshipping our golden calves – our American IDOLS? You see: our current CRISIS, though EXTREMELY scary, OFFERS us an OPPORTUNITY. Mary Nelson says: *WHAT an OPPORTUNITY to CHECK where our TRUST lies, WHAT we treasure. The call to the early Christians was to a DIFFERENT set of values, to trust in GOD, NOT possessions or money. Jesus speaks in Luke 12 that one's real life in NO way depends upon the number of his possessions, and goes on to say, get yourselves PURSES that never grow old ... for wherever your TREASURE is, you may be CERTAIN that your HEART will be there, too.* Yes, Nelson is RIGHT! NOW is the time to articulate a set of VALUES that puts PEOPLE over possessions, that balances PERSONAL interests with the common GOOD, and that seeks to be STEWARDS of the environment, our gifts, and our time, and leaves the world BETTER for the NEXT generation. Friends, THAT is making a LIVING instead of a DYING! Yes, let's let GO of our American IDOLS, and put GOD and GOD'S values FIRST in our lives, even though we live in a CULTURE that seems DETERMINED to **make a DYING** instead of a **LIVING**. Amen.