

**What Grips You?**

**Sunday, October 29, 2023, 10:00 a.m.**

**All Saints Church, Pasadena**

**The Rev. Mike Kinman**

Jesus said: "For this reason, I tell you all, be not anxious about your life, what you all will eat or what you all will drink, or about your body, what you all will wear."

And the people replied: "...Yeah, right!"

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More than 50 years ago, a major league pitcher named Jim Bouton wrote a groundbreaking book called Ball Four.

It's one of those books that wouldn't even get noticed today, but back in 1970 it was a huge deal, scandalous even ... because it was one of the first times an athlete had broken the code of silence of what goes on in the clubhouse and gave a real and often unflattering look at baseball and its players.

It's a great book, but the best line is the very last one. And it's why I keep this baseball on my desk wherever I am.

Looking back over his long career, in the very last line of his book, Jim Bouton says:

"You see, you spend a good piece of your life gripping a baseball, and in the end it turns out that it was the other way around all the time."

"You spend a good piece of your life gripping a baseball, and in the end it turns out that it was the other way around all the time."

I don't know if Jim Bouton knew he was speaking deep theological truth ... but he was.

Whatever we grip onto most tightly is what has us most tightly in its grip.

I keep this baseball on my desk ... and I pick it up when I need to ask myself "what am I gripping onto most tightly here?"

Sometimes it's my need to be liked.

Sometimes it's my need to be right.

Sometimes it's my need to be seen as a good rector or not to commit what was drilled into me as the cardinal sin of hurting anyone, especially someone I care about ... which is a great

sentiment but tends to make me too conflict avoidant in a world where we are just bound to hurt each other in the course of everyday life.

“What is it that I am gripping onto most tightly in this moment?” I ask myself. Because I can be pretty sure the fear of losing that ...

I mean that’s why we hold onto things tightly

... because we are afraid of losing them ...

I can be pretty sure that whatever I am gripping most tightly ... is what has me most tightly in its grasp.

And that means that the more I can loosen my grip. Not throw whatever it is I am grasping away but just hold it loosely and be OK if it goes away ... the freer I am.

Now part of why I need this baseball

Plus, I gotta tell you, there is just something so satisfying about holding a baseball. But part of why is that even though I first read those words in 1987, and even though I have ingested the wisdom of them and even preached on them, I still struggle with it.

I struggle with trusting that I am loved even if I am not liked.

I struggle with trusting that I am loved even if I am not right ... and that sometimes right and wrong is overrated anyway.

I struggle with trusting that I am a good rector not because I create certain results - which is usually the message that is out there for any leader – but that I’m good when I love you by showing you my heart in a way that creates a safe space for us to show each other our hearts ... and together seek the healing we all so desperately need but too often fear to admit that we need... even to ourselves.

And even though I have worked and continue to work on it, I struggle with talking to people about giving money to something that it can be argued that I benefit from personally.

More on that in a moment.

In this morning’s Gospel, Jesus talks about money. Which is no surprise because Jesus talks about money more than he talks about anything else in scripture.

And it’s because Jesus knows Jim Bouton. He knows that whatever it is we hold onto most tightly is what has us most tightly in its grasp.

And when Jesus looks around, what he sees holds people most tightly in its grasp is money and all their fears surrounding it.

And this is one of those scripture passages we can read and not have to transport ourselves into a first century mindset. We don't have to ask ourselves what demon possession really means or know what an omer is or something like that to relate to this one.

Because the more things have changed, the more this one has stayed the same.

Jesus says "don't store up wealth." Don't grip so tightly to wealth. Instead loosen our grip on wealth so we can grab onto those things that bring us true joy, not just an absence of fear.

Loosen our grip on wealth so we can grab on to love.  
So we can grab onto joy.  
So we can grab onto freedom.

Loosen our grip on wealth because our grip on wealth is of a fear of loss that will forever have us in its grasp until we let go of it.

And that's what it is. It's fear. And it is well-founded fear in this society. Because we have ample evidence – a million voices a day that tell us we are on our own.

The entire insurance industry is a concession to the fact that we cannot be counted on to care for each other and to have others care for us ... and we know that, so we hold onto what we have and build up storehouses of it because we know that it can go away and everything around us says that if it goes away ... We. Are. Screwed.

In fact, many of us are kinda pre-screwed because it's not wealth that has us in its grip, it's debt. Educational debt. Consumer debt. Health care debt. Trapped in the rental economy debt. All that debt that comes from living in a society where those basic rights of education, food, clothing, health care and shelter are not guaranteed.

We hear Jesus say this morning "Be not anxious about your life, what you all will eat or drink or about your body and what you will wear." Easy for you to say, Jesus ... you've got a bunch of wealthy women bankrolling you while you travel from town to town with your friends living off the kindness of strangers ... and then how afraid can you really be of hunger when you've got that whole loaves and fishes trick in your bag?

And that's not all. Because if we are in a position to store up wealth ... we generally raise our standard of living. And while it is easy and feels good to raise our standard of living, it is not only painful to decrease it, because we start measuring ourselves and our worthiness and lovability by our standard of living, the higher our standard of living, the more we start looking aspirationally toward the next horizon and the next ... often in ways that can kill our joy about where we are and the abundance we have.

I'll give you an example.

A few months ago, I took a trip with Thistle Farms to Nepal to visit some women's cooperatives in Kathmandu. And the donor who funded the trip wanted us to be at our best and make the best use of our time there, so she paid for business class tickets from LA to Kathmandu for the group of us.

Now, maybe you fly business class all the time ... but I don't. And I've never flown it on an international flight. And so, I was thrilled and grateful to have that seat that turns into a bed, really good food and free drinks, a TV screen you could probably see from 30,000 feet – I watched all three Creed movies – it was awesome!

And right there ... most of you are probably thinking ... wow. An all-expense paid business class trip to Kathmandu. Must be nice. Yeah. It was amazing. And I'm deeply grateful for it. And ... it didn't stop two things from happening inside me.

The first is that at one point during my flight, I got up to stretch my leg, and I took a peek into ...first class.

They had doors that gave them their own private cabins.  
They had an onboard shower spa.

I think even their pillows were softer.

So here I am, flying business class halfway around the world ... for free ... headed to an amazing place ... for free ... and it's great ... and I'm enjoying it ... and I'm grateful.

And ... a part of me is going. "Man ... but in first class." And it killed just a little bit of my joy even as I chastised myself for feeling that way. Which is kinda dumb because we really can't help our feelings, right? Just express them, learn from them and love ourselves and each other through them.

And that's part of my point. That envy wasn't a "bad feeling" and I wasn't a "bad person" for feeling that way. Whether we were originally wired that way or whether our society has turned us into being this way, at least right now for us that's just how the gravity pulls us.

And ...it sure wasn't helpful.

I needed to loosen my grip on my desire to have "the best" and to have "more" ... because you know as soon as I got to first class, I would have tuned in some movie on my big screen TV and there would have been someone in a private jet and the same thing would happen. And pretty soon you're Jeff Bezos or Elon Musk in your ridiculous rocketship.

Don't hate the player. Hate the game.

The second thing that happened, happened on my flight back ... which, because I had extended my trip and spent an amazing week traveling through India – again, wow -- was an Economy Class trip.

I've flown economy class or coach or steerage or whatever you want to call it my whole life. And yet I had never done it after having flown business class over three continents.

And while again, I was still grateful ... I was literally flying back from a transformative trip to Nepal and India ... having spent three days at Gandhi's ashram and immersing myself in his teachings (and by the way, Gandhi made a point of traveling third class everywhere for just these reasons) ... and part of me was still gripping onto that experience of the flight over because part of me that whole trip was looking longingly toward the front of the plane and remembering what that business class seat felt like.

We get accustomed  
...and then we get addicted  
...and then we want more.

And it is a never -ending prison of increasing dissatisfaction at best and misery at worst that drives most of the major crises we are facing, because it is the driving force behind the colonialism whose bills are continuing to come due not just in places like Gaza and Central America and Sub-Saharan Africa but on a planet that we have seen as a source of extraction rather than a partner in joyful living.

We are accustomed and we get addicted. I know it has happened, and it still happens to me. It's why when I was in campus ministry, the advice I always gave graduating students was keep your overhead, your standard of living as low as you can handle it because I just knew that when I had been able to do that, I had always been much freer.

But even that had always been much more a feeling I had and something I would say than something I absolutely believed.

And then one day about 14 years ago, I got an email from a young woman I had met 10 years earlier. To tell you how long ago it was, we met sitting together on a SuperShuttle at the World Trade Center to take us to Newark Airport. And I struck up a conversation with her because she had this really cool T-shirt she had made that said "my economy went global and all I got was this stupid t-shirt."

Anyway, she was in her early 20s and when she found out I worked with college students she asked me what advice I would give to her as someone just starting out. And so I told her what I told my college students ... keep your overhead as low as you can stand it because the lower your overhead the freer you will be.

Anyway, here's the email I got. I absolutely saved it.

Hi Rev. Kinman,

This might sound very strange, but: I think I met you on a bus to Newark airport about 10 1/2 years ago. I'm emailing because I wanted to thank you, very deeply, for a piece of advice that you gave me. We were discussing social justice, and how to make place for it in modern lives, and you told me something very simple that I somehow had the sense to take to heart: Keep your overhead low.

So here's what that piece of advice has let me do:

- Travel the world for six months
- Maintain financial independence
- Build a career reporting on poverty and low-wage work
- Learn Spanish
- Write a book on food and class (out next month from Scribner ... by the way, it's a great book called *The American Way of Eating*)

I'm emailing because I was recently asked what was the best piece of advice I had received, and how I'd managed to build such an unusual and meaningful career. And I realized that, really, both answers were rooted in that conversation I'd had on the bus with you. I stayed in a cheap apartment even when my income rose -- and was able to withstand changing jobs so that I could keep doing work I loved. A cheap apartment meant I could save money to travel, and that finding a subletter was easy—and gave me enough perspective to do better work writing about poverty and opportunity here at home. And it meant that I could accept a tiny book advance to do an amazing project.

So, basically: Thanks. In its own way, that conversation has meant the world to me. And I'm incredibly grateful to have had it.

Hope all is well with you,

Best,

Tracie

And ... there it is. Jesus says "don't store up wealth, store up all the things you cannot buy."

Jesus ... meet Tracie McMillan.

And I know this. I mean ... the baseball, right? I know this and I still struggle with it. Part of it is because once we get going on this path it is so hard to stop.

U2 wrote a fantastic song called *God, Part II*. It's a brilliant answer to John Lennon's song, *God*, where Lennon lists the all these things he doesn't believe in. You remember

I don't believe in Beatles  
 I just believe in me  
 Yoko and me  
 And that's reality

Well, Bono gives his own list of things he doesn't believe in. Except his list also is about how all the things he "doesn't believe in" are things that are actually the guiding values of his life.

My favorite line is when he sings

Don't believe in excess  
 Success is to give  
 Don't believe in riches  
 But you should see where I live

I love this line. And it's perfect for this sermon. Because – you all been to the All Saints Rectory?

Wealth is not bad ... wealth can do amazing things. And ... it's a huge trap and our biggest spiritual challenge because it is about who and what owns us – if we grasp it tightly instead of holding it loosely.

I'm on a Rumi kick recently and I came across this verse that sums up what Jesus is preaching and Tracie found.

"Forget safety  
 Live where you fear to live.  
 Destroy your reputation.  
 Be notorious."

Rumi is describing a life of freedom ... which is what I kinda think we all want! And the way we get it is living in such a way that we trust community to provide what we need so that we don't have to grasp onto it so tightly ourselves. It's why the earliest followers of Jesus, according to Acts, held all things in common and gave to each other as had need.

That's what I want for me. That's what I want for each of us. That's what I want for us as an All Saints community. I want us to be so free from grasping our wealth that we can feel the absolute joy of giving whenever someone is in need and the absolute freedom of knowing that we don't need to fear because we have a community that will never let us go without.

I knew a church in Washington D.C. called the Potters House, who lived this. They asked everyone who was a member to tithe – give 10 percent of their income to the church. They said ... that's your job. To keep 90% and give 10%.

And ... if you couldn't pay your rent ... the church would pay it for you.

If your car broke down and you needed it to get to work and you couldn't afford to fix it ... the church would get it fixed for you.

If you couldn't afford a medical procedure or insurance .. the church would pay it for you.

Because, they said ... that's the job of the community. To make sure nobody gets left behind or goes without.

That's some serious Jesus vibe!

And talking to people who were part of that community, they would always talk about it because from the highest to the lowest income it was one of the things they loved most about the Potter's House ... that they knew they were in a community they trusted would never let them go without anything they truly needed.

They were joyful because they were freed from the worry ... and they were freed to give. They moved their wealth from fear ... where it is for way too many of us ... to joy.

I mean, doesn't that sound amazing?

And really, there is nothing stopping All Saints from being a community like that ... except our own fear.

The past two years, we have stayed afloat financially – and here I need to say what that means is we have maintained the level of staffing and programs that we are used to. We have significant financial issues ... and in a world where upwards of 40% of churches are in danger of closing in the next five years, we are not in that category. And so we always need to look at our challenges in context ... and realize that context also invites us to a deeper level of service with communities that have less.

Anyway, the past two years, we have maintained financially with government COVID assistance that won't be there next year. And even after 50 years of absolute prosperity in this church we basically have little or no endowment for a church our size and millions of dollars of deferred maintenance on our buildings. So, bills are coming due, and we're kind of in a bind. We've kind of been Grasshoppering instead of Anting and now it's wintertime.

Because you see, historically, most years, congregational giving has accounted for 85-90% of the All Saints budget ... and as the people with the greatest income are moving into retirement and as so many younger people who are mired in educational, medical and consumer debt and trapped in the rental economy are coming into this community, the financial picture is getting harder and harder.

And yet we've still got this. Yes, we are actively working on long-term solutions, building endowment and diversifying income streams ... all the business type stuff we need to do. And

yet the central challenge is a spiritual challenge of liberation ... because the truth is if every person in this congregation kept 90% of their post-tax income and gave 10% to the church we would have more money than we knew what to do with. We could guarantee that kind of security that comes from community that frees us from anxiety and get filled with the joy of giving and creating along the way.

And that is where my heart is talking about giving. Because I know from my own life those times that I have been able to do this have been the most joyful times of my life. And I want that for you and I want that for us.

And ... that gets back to the trouble I have, struggling with talking to people about giving money to something that it can be argued that I benefit from personally – like, say ... All Saints Church. Especially because one of the unspoken ... and I've gotta say increasingly spoken ... expectations of the job is that I be a really jamming fundraiser. And that's because I've got weird voices in my head that are hardwired from my insecurities.

You see, I have encountered so much cynicism in my life that I have an unfortunate habit of projecting it on others ... and pre-emptively preparing for it.

So when I ask you for money for All Saints Church, I struggle with internal fears that you think the only value you have to me and the church is how much you can give ... like you are some ATM or something. And frankly that's how those among us with wealth get treated a lot of the time so it's not like it's – you know – a completely irrational fear. And money is power in this society so sometimes we respond to that by using our money to manipulate and get what we want instead of giving in joy. The gravitational pull of all those things is pretty strong because in most of the world that's just called “doing business.”

So, we're asking you to give to All Saints Church. And because we are facing a truly sizable projected deficit making up more than half a million dollars in COVID funds from 2023, it's easy to have fear be our motivator because frankly part of what's happening right now as we confront our financial situation is a lot of fear and anxiety about how we are going to make this work.

And yet, while there is every reason to give in response to that fear ... I actually think that is a horrible reason to give. What I really hope we will all do is think about the role our wealth has in our life and the role we want wealth to have in your life.

Is our relationship with the wealth you have more about fear or more about joy?

If you are experiencing any sort of poverty, what a difference would it make to be freed from that burden? Actually to “not be anxious about your life, what you all will eat or what you all will drink, or about your body, what you all will wear.”

And if you are among those of us who are not, what a joy would it be to be a part of freeing each other from that?

For all of us, whether what has us in our grip is wealth or debt, fear or anxiety, what would it be like to let go of that so we can embrace the God who is love and let that God who is love embrace and provide for us through one another?

If every one of us gave 10% of our income ... heck if every one of us gave 5% of our income to All Saints Church ... we could stop worrying about money as a church and get on with the joy of loving deeply with the abundance we share.

I hope we will consider that ... I mean really, really consider that ... and not just dismiss it as for someone else or assume we can't do it. Because this is about our liberation. Consider and embrace this kind of giving not for fear of losing what we have, but for joy of embracing what we can become.

No matter what wealth we have, I hope together we can learn to hold it loosely and joyfully so we can hold onto God and each other with the same ferocity of love with which God holds us.

Because it's what we grip most tightly ... that will always have us most tightly in its embrace. Amen.