

## 6<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time – Luke 6:17, 20-26

Two old friends were catching up on their lives over drinks at a sidewalk café. The one said to the other, “Why is it that you have not yet been married?” The other friend said, “Well to tell the truth, I have been looking my whole life for the **perfect** woman.

There were several times where I thought I had found her. Once in Barcelona I met a woman who was beautiful and intelligent and I was smitten to the heart. I thought certainly this is the woman that I should marry. Then I found out that she was vain and conceited and so that relationship came to an end.

Then once in Boston I met a woman who was outgoing and generous. She seemed **perfect** to me in every respect. Only later I found out that she was flighty and irresponsible. Clearly, she was not the one I was looking for.

Then recently I met a woman in Montreal who was intelligent and beautiful, generous and warm, she had a great sense of humor and dedicated herself to others. I said to myself, this indeed is the **perfect** woman. This is the woman that I should marry.” “Well,” said the friend, “Why didn’t you marry her?” The other man fingered his glass and replied in a quiet voice, “Because *she*, was looking for the perfect *man*.”

To be an American is to be a consumer. Dangerous things begin to happen when we allow consumerism to influence our relationships: the way that we relate to others, the way that we relate to God.

You cannot choose a wife in the way you would shop for a new car. You cannot analyze your relationship to God in the way that you would analyze an investment on the stock market.

For all the differences in our culture of race, religion, education, economic status, Americans are united in the fact that they are consumers.

We do not all have the same amount of money to spend, but it is **our** money and spending, it gives us power. Whether we spend it at Walmart or K-Mart, when we are consumers, we are in control. *The customer is always right.*

Clearly the primary mode of recreation in the United States is shopping. When we are depressed, we shop. When we are happy, we spend. When we are bored, we buy. *Shop 'til you drop!* It's the American way.

Now the point of this homily is not to attack consumerism. Consumerism is a part of our culture whether we like it or not. But my point is to warn you that it is dangerous to allow consumerism to influence and to warp our relationships.

Because we as American are so fundamentally consumers, we can begin to approach our relationships as a kind of commerce. Taking that step is asking for trouble.

Therefore, I want to name three expectations of consumers and illustrate how none of these are helpful in directing our relationship to God or our relationships to others.

Consumers expect that life is going to be **fair, beneficial and free.**

Consumers expect that life is going to be fair. We are always looking for a fair price for what we buy. We would love to find a bargain, but no one wants to be cheated. By and large we are pleased with the price that we pay for the things that we buy. Otherwise we would not buy them.

Yet, if something is defective, we want our money back. We want to be compensated, otherwise it would not be **fair.** Now this kind of commercial fairness should not be an expectation for living. The truth is that life is often unfair.

Is it fair to be born with a handicap? Is it fair that a family member is dying of cancer? Is it fair that innocent people die by violence every day? Now none of these evils should be dismissed or tolerated. But clearly the commercial view of fairness is inadequate to deal with the complexities and the mysteries of life.

Consumers expect life to be **beneficial**. We only buy things because we think they will be good for us. If we don't like it, we don't buy it. The question which drives the consumer is "What benefit will be in this for me? How will my life be better with this new house, with this new sweater?"

The consumer needs to know, "What will I get out of this purchase?" Now transferring the idea of commercial benefit into relationships is not helpful. We do of course benefit from our relationships to God and others.

But unlike the purchases that we make, relationships need to be mutual. Not only do **we** benefit, but **others** must benefit as well. Therefore, the commercial idea of benefit skews our approach to relationships.

Once we start thinking, "What do I get out of being a Catholic? What do I get out of this friendship?" Then the mutuality in our relationships is obscured and a healthy approach to relating is undercut.

Consumers think that life should be **free**. Consumers expect to have the discretion of choosing one thing over another. We might be simply buying a napkin ring, but we expect to have the freedom to decide *which* napkin ring we will purchase.

We expect to decide when we are tired of one napkin ring and want to buy a new one. When that commercial freedom is transposed into relationships, it can be harmful.

Such freedom reduces the permanency that relationships require. If I don't like this church, I'll go to another. If this person is not meeting my needs, then the friendship is over.

Consumers value **fairness, benefit, and freedom**. But these categories are inadequate to the realities of human relationships and our relationship to God.

We need wider categories, deeper categories. In today's gospel Jesus shows us where to find them. By claiming that the poor are blessed and the wealthy are to be pitied, he lifts up counter-cultural values.

He is asking us to look at those parts of life that are not esteemed by our culture and to recognize in them a necessary part of living. He is asking us to widen our categories and values.

Instead of being preoccupied with what is fair, we need to develop within ourselves a sense of acceptance, of humbly making our peace with those things in life that we do not understand or we cannot control.

Instead of worrying only about our own benefit, we need to make room in our life for compassion and service, reaching out in love to others. Instead of treasuring simply our own freedom and discretion, we need to espouse commitment and loyalty, binding ourselves to others even when it is difficult, even when it demands sacrifice.

We as Americans are consumers, and consumerism extols fairness and benefit and freedom. But Jesus calls us to look in a countercultural direction. He calls us to open ourselves to acceptance, to service, to commitment. His gospel insists that it is only when we enlarge our attitudes in that direction that we can truly appreciate the breadth and mystery of life. It is only when we make room for countercultural values that we will have the clarity to see the Kingdom of God.