

# Enough Already!

*Exodus 20:1-17; John 2:13-22*

CWZepp, BWCOB, March 11, 2012

“Look, Lorax,” I said. “There’s no cause for alarm.  
I chopped just one tree. I am doing no harm.  
I’m being quite useful. This thing is a Thneed.  
A Thneed’s a Fine-Something-That-All-People-Need!  
It’s a shirt. It’s a sock. It’s a glove. It’s a hat.  
But it has *other* uses. Yes, far beyond that.  
You can use it for carpets. For pillows! For sheets!  
Or curtains! Or covers for bicycle seats!

The Lorax said, “Sir! You are crazy with greed.  
There is no one on earth who would buy that fool Thneed!”

But the very next minute I proved he was wrong.  
For, just at that minute, a chap came along,  
and he thought that the Thneed I had knitted was great.  
He happily bought it for three ninety-eight.

I laughed at the Lorax, “You poor stupid guy!”  
You never can tell what some people will buy.”

I meant no harm. I most truly did not.  
But I had to grow bigger. So bigger I got.  
I biggered my factory. I biggered my roads.  
I biggered my wagons. I biggered the loads  
Of the Thneeds I shopped out. I was shipping them forth  
to the South! To the East! To the West! To the North!  
I went right on biggering...selling more Thneeds.  
And I biggered my money, which everyone needs.<sup>1</sup>

This past week, I took a few hours to go to the movies to see Universal Pictures adaptation of Dr. Seuss’ 1971 classic story, *The Lorax*. It has always been a favorite of mine, and I figured it was worth my time and the price of admission to see this modern-day parable of over-consumption to add some contemporary perspective as I prepared for worship this Sunday, on which we are focusing our worship on consumerism. It’s a well-done movie in my opinion, and I do recommend seeing it if you are into this sort of film.

For those of you who are not familiar with the story, the Lorax is Dr. Seuss’s fictional character who speaks for the truffala trees, which the Once-ler began chopping down to harvest for the production of his Thneeds, which are, of course, something that everyone needs. To seriously over-simplify,

---

<sup>1</sup> Dr. Seuss. *The Lorax*.

the basic point of the story is to illustrate the dangers of blind consumption, specifically the threat it poses to the environment.

Now, it is no secret that we live in a consumer culture. Cultural commentators have been telling us for years that our Western culture – and especially our American culture – is becoming more and more defined by our patterns of consumption. And it is coming at a high cost. Our land and our waterways bear the scars of our production and the waste of our consumption. The economies of our nation and many of our neighbors are burdened by the skyrocketing debt we have amassed through our collective overspending, and our political life is mired in seemingly endless debate on what we should do about it. Many of us live in a constant state of anxiety about how we can make ends meet to support our families and sustain the lifestyles we have chosen and think we need.

But perhaps the greatest cost of our consumer culture is a more subtle one, one that has been levied since the dawn of human civilization and the first exchanges of goods, but magnified and entrenched ever more deeply in our contemporary American way of life. That cost is the one we pay with our souls – our very selves. Today, we increasingly identify and define ourselves by our possessions, our things, our “stuff.” And with today’s technology, many of us increasingly craft our sense of self through our digital identities, from Facebook and other social networking hubs to our personalized ringtones on our mobile telephones. In his 2007 book, *Brand Jesus: Christianity in a Consumerist Age*, Tyler Wigg Stevenson says “to live in a consumerist world means that who we understand ourselves to be is deeply and significantly related to what we buy [and] consume.” He goes on to say that, “In the act of consumption, we purchase our very sense of selves....[and] because we lack strong inherited stories, we are left with the burden of constructing our own sense of meaning and place in the world. By and large, we have done so with the tools that lay closest at hand – consumer goods.”<sup>2</sup>

This was particularly interesting commentary for me to have in mind as I watched the new movie version of *The Lorax*. One of the significant differences between the movie and the original story is that the movie contains a significant amount of back story that gives us insight into the character of the Once-ler – the over-consuming inventor and producer of Thneeds. Whereas the book presented the Once-ler as a shadowy, distant, and largely unknown character, the movie allows us to peak into his inner world, revealing his all-too human motivations and inner turmoil. We see his early youthful optimism, with a song on his lips and plans to make it big. We see the way he desperately tries to prove himself worthy and successful in the eyes of his family. We see him wrestling with the pleas of the Lorax to take care of the trees, and his fateful decision to betray his promise to not cut down more trees, spurred on by the mother whose approval he desires. And we see the despair that grips him when he finally realizes what he has done.

As I have thought about this, I realized that these two ways of presenting the story of the Lorax are indicative of our own story with our consumer culture. Few of us are motivated by the reckless greed and thirst for profit that characterizes that Once-ler we see in Dr. Seuss’ original story. The distant Once-ler to whom we are introduced in the book is the kind of figure it is easy to demonize and judge. Much like the “fat cats on Wall Street” that we like to blame for our consumer-driven messes today, these people are not like most of us. And though we may be inspired to “care a whole awful lot” and do something to try to clean up the mess, we don’t see ourselves as part of the problem.

---

<sup>2</sup> Tyler Wigg Stevenson. *Brand Jesus: Christianity in a Consumerist Age*. pp 26-27.

But the Once-ler of the movie is different. He is very much like us. Perhaps uncomfortably so. Like us, he was caught up in something much bigger than simple production and consumption. Like us, it wasn't about the Thneeds at all. It was about his sense of self. It was about something missing in the Once-ler's life, something that kept him striving, something that kept him biggering, something that pushed him to make more Thneeds, which, of course, everyone needs.

During this season of Lent, we have been focusing our worship around confession – naming the ways in which in our lives and our faith have become distorted and we settle for less than abundant life and work against it in our individual lives and in our life together. Today we confess the way that consumerism grips our lives and distorts our faith. And perhaps the first thing we must do is recognize that we – each one of us – is caught in its grip. It is easy for us to bemoan its evils – to lament the commercialization of holidays and special occasions, the saturation of our media and public life with advertising, the stripping and polluting of our environment, and the caricature-like excesses of the 1%. What is harder for us is to look deeply in the mirror and see that our lives are deeply colored by consumer pigment.

It is hard to overstate how significant this reality is for our life and faith. Jesus talked more about money and wealth than he did about Heaven and Hell combined. The only thing about which he spoke more was the Kingdom of God. Of 39 parables, 11 of them deal with money and wealth. Quite simply, our relationship with money and wealth – our economic lives – is a barometer of our life of faith. Because money, and the things we can buy, compete with God for our attention, devotion, and service. As Jesus says succinctly in Matthew 6:24, “You cannot serve God and money.”

Now few of us would say that we serve money. At least not consciously. But if you are like me, when I am really honest with myself, and when I look long and hard at my lifestyle, my decisions, even my list of recent purchases, I know that my intentions and my stated beliefs about money do not always line up with the way I live and the things I buy.

A story is told of a Native American and his friend visiting downtown NYC, walking in Times Square in Manhattan. The streets were filled with people and the deafening noise that comes with any city: cars honking their horns, sirens wailing, and the like. Suddenly the Native American man stopped and said, “I hear a cricket.”

His friend said, “What? You must be crazy. You couldn't possibly hear a cricket in all this noise.”

“No, I'm sure of it...I heard a cricket.” He listened carefully for a moment, and then walked across the street to a big cement planter where some shrubs were growing. He looked into the bushes, beneath the branches, and sure enough, he located a small cricket.

His friend was utterly amazed. “That's incredible. You must have superhuman ears.”

“No,” said the Native American. “My ears are no different than yours. It all depends on what you're listening for.”

“I could never hear a cricket in this noise,” said his friend.

“Yes you could,” came the reply. “It all depends on what is really important to you. Here let me show you.” He reached into his pocket, pulled out a few coins, and discretely dropped them on the

sidewalk. And with the noise of the crowded streets still blaring in their ears, they noticed almost every head within 20 feet turn to follow the coins tinkling on the pavement.

“See?”<sup>3</sup>

Now I don’t know if this story has any factual basis. But it does contain a truth about our lives. Our ears are often finely tuned to something other than God. And that something is usually revealed when we take an honest look at our patterns of consumption and the way we use (and don’t use) our money. As Jesus said, “Let those who have ears to hear listen!”

We are called, as people of God and followers of Christ, to be different; to be “in the world, but not of it.” This is no easy task. It is complicated to say the least. How do we balance our economic needs in the midst of a culture saturated with advertisements designed to stimulate our all-too-human proclivity to covet the newest and best things? How do we avoid allowing our identities to become wrapped up in our “stuff”? How do we live and plan and act responsibly with our money – spending wisely, saving prudently, giving generously – without being sucked into the temptation to store up for ourselves treasures on earth? How do we keep from becoming yet another Once-ler, looking back on our life’s work – which seemed so all-important at the time – and realizing that all of our striving has not filled the void in our heart that we so desperately sought to fill.

The answers to these questions will be different for each of us. How we work out the details of our economic lives in the context of our faith is a daily and a lifelong task. But there should be one constant among us, one mandate by which all else should be ordered and judged. “You shall have no other gods before me.” First things first. It was and is the first and greatest commandment.

And I know that I have broken it. Sometimes consciously. More often unconsciously. But there is no doubt that I have allowed things other than God to take first place in my life, and in that, have striven for all manner of things which ultimately never satisfy.

Nelson Rockefeller, an heir to the Rockefeller fortune, was once asked, “How much is enough?” Rockefeller paused for a moment, smiled and replied, “Just a little bit more.”<sup>4</sup>

Too often, our lives betray our affiliation with the Rockefellers of the world. What would it look like if we took Jesus seriously enough to look at the lilies and say, “We have enough already!”

Walter Brueggemann says, “In the face of consumer values, the church pauses and names and kneels in gratitude, and arises with the power to be different.”<sup>5</sup>

May it be so.

---

<sup>3</sup> From an e-mail forward.

<sup>4</sup> Quoted by Arthur Simon in *How Much is Enough? Hungering for God in an Affluent Culture*. p 111.

<sup>5</sup> Walter Brueggemann. “By Faith.” in *The Collected Sermons of Walter Brueggemann*. p. 24.

## Words from Two Kingdoms

- A: Our culture tells us that we must keep up with the Jones – with new cars, immaculate lawns, first rate fashion, the latest technology, etc, etc.
- B: Jesus says, “Be on your guard against covetousness; for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.” (Luke 12:15)
- A: Our culture tells us that God helps those who help themselves.
- B: Jesus says: “As you do to one of the least of these...you do to me.” (Matthew 25:40)
- A: Our culture tells us we need to invest well and save for the future, that we might send our kids to a good college, maintain our lifestyle in retirement, and lay a strong foundation for future generations.
- B: Jesus says, “Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth...but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, for where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” (Matthew 6:19-21)
- A: Our culture tells us that God has blessed our people and our land with prosperity.
- B: Jesus says, “Blessed are the poor, the hungry, and those who mourn.” (Luke 6:20-21)
- A: Our culture tells us that the 1% have it made.
- B: Jesus says, “It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.” (Mark 10:25)
- A: Our culture tells us that we can’t get anywhere without money.
- B: Jesus says, “None of you can become my disciple if you do not give up your possessions.” (Luke 14:33)
- A: Our culture tells us that money is what “makes the world go ‘round.’”
- B: Jesus says, “No one can serve two masters...you cannot serve God and wealth.” (Matthew 6:24)
- A: Our culture tells us, “You are what you buy.”
- B: Jesus says, “You are the salt of the earth and the light of the world.” (Matthew 5:13-14)
- A: Our culture tells us that life is a struggle to survive, and that we can never have enough.
- B: Jesus says, “Do not worry about what you will eat or wear, but strive first for the kingdom of God and God’s righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.” (Matthew 6:31-33)