



*"...The heart of the sons of men
is full of evil,
and madness is in their heart
while they live..."
(Ecclesiastes 9:3)*

*Wherewith shall I come before the LORD,
and bow myself before the high God?
He hath shewed thee, O man, what is good;
and what doth the LORD require of thee,
but to do justly, and to love mercy,
and to walk humbly with thy God?
(Micah 6:6, 8)*

a homily on just society and our mad state of rebellion

healing our brokenness inadequately (part 5):

america's pessimistic addiction to consumerism

*"They heal my people's brokenness inadequately, asserting:
'It's OK! It's OK!'
But nothing is OK!" (Jeremiah 6:14, author's translation).*

Introduction

Judicial inequality and injustice. Economic inequality and injustice. Rampant greed and fraud on the part of wealthy individuals and essential institutions. Bribery and corruption of government officials. Inordinate influence of the wealthy of laws and public policy. Unjust laws and policies favoring the powerful and influential while disadvantaging the less powerful and influential. The infliction of the vulnerable with hunger, homelessness, sickness, and anxiety. Self-righteous justification of the mad state of rebellion. Stubborn refusal to acknowledge these and a host of other societal ills.

No, I am not talking about America of 2024. However, if the shoe fits...

I am talking about late 6th and early 5th century B.C. Judah. These, and many other evils undermined the temporal, moral, and spiritual health of the nation. All the signs were there.

The nation was on the verge of collapse. It was in desperate need of truth, however sour it might be to the national palate. But the nation's shepherds fed the populace an empty diet of propagandistic myths of nationalism. Many of Israel's prophets joined the fray. Israel's watchmen, Jeremiah charged,

“Heal my people's brokenness inadequately, asserting:
‘It's OK! It's OK!’”

“But nothing,” Jeremiah replies, “is OK!”

Does this, too, sound familiar? Strike close to home? It should. Too often, today's religious leaders—whether they go by the name, “prophet,” “priest,” or “pastor”— seem to lack both discernment and courage. They seem utterly blind to and mute about sin and evil, unless, of course, it involves some form of real or imagined sexual deviance. If they do speak out, it is often with muted, vague, delicate, and generalized voices and statements. These shepherds seem not up to the challenging task of bold and clear truth telling of the sort that our society so desperately needs. Now is not the time for delicacy and caution.

This homily is the fifth in an ongoing series entitled, “Healing Our Brokenness Inadequately,” based on Jeremiah 6.¹⁴ In this series, we explore specific examples of individual and societal sins about which political and religious leaders all too often remain willfully blind or, if sighted, stubbornly mute... and therefore complicit. Tragically, sometimes their complicity is even active and enthusiastic. With these examples in mind, we will often call upon the classic Hebrew prophets as well as other ancient and not so ancient prophets to speak as if from the dust. We read these discerning writings in light of the societal ills and injustices that abound in our modern world. Sometimes we even imagine and take a stab at replicating what a Hebrew prophet might have to say if he were to come to us from the past.

In today's homily, we offer another example of our brokenness about which too many remain silent and worse, in which too many engage themselves. Such moments as ours desperately

cry out for the type of discernment, boldness, and truth-telling so characteristic of the Hebrew prophets.

Pessimistic consumption

Recent weeks have seen a number of headlines such as the following.

“Us Consumer Confidence Fell Again in October”¹

“Consumers Remain Pessimistic About the Future—Even as They Continued to Spend”²

“Us consumers keep spending despite high prices and their own gloomy outlook. Can it last?”³

“Why Americans feel gloomy about the economy despite falling inflation and low unemployment”⁴

“Black Friday shoppers spent a record \$9.8 billion in U.S. online sales, up 7.5% from last year”⁵

“Cyber Monday rings in 12.4 billion in sales as consumers hunt for bargains”⁶

The American public—they are called “consumers,” for good reason, rather than, say, “citizens,” by those who prey on their insatiable appetite for more, more, more—are “pessimistic,” have low “confidence” in the economy and the future, “feel gloomy,” and possess a “gloomy outlook.” The *Consumer Confidence Index* is down. The *Present Situation Index* is in decline, still.

¹ The Conference Board

² The Conference Board

³ Christopher Rugaber and Anne D’Innocenzio, Associated Press

⁴ Christopher Rugaber, Associated Press

⁵ Rebecca Picciotto, CNBC

⁶ Brooke DiPalma, Yahoo

But, spending is up! UP. UP. In two 24-hour periods, Friday, November 24 and Monday, November 27, 2023, Americans, or consumers, spent \$22.2 billion. Purportedly, spending during these two days was in no small part credited to consumers looking for bargains. But, of course, the percentage of those purchasing on credit is way up—higher interest rates wiping out the meager savings from sale prices. As the Christmas Season continues and the year ebbs away, spending trends show no signs of letting up even as pessimism persists.

With the inflation rate at the lowest point in two and one-half years, unemployment below 4% for the longest stretch since the 1960s, new hiring up, many wages up, and consumers spending like there's no tomorrow, economists are befuddled by the pessimistic surveys and the rabid spending habits of American consumers. The two seem irrationally contradictory.

The befuddlement is somewhat comical. For, as the name implies, Americans have become by nature “consumers.” Probably, their consumption is to be credited as much to habit as to any other factor, such as sale prices. Indeed, their habit of consumption looks very much like an addiction—out of control and irrational.

Consuming addiction

We have all heard, by now, that the brain has a “pleasure center”—the “nucleus accumbens” it is called. This “reward circuit” lets us know when something is enjoyable and reinforces the desire for us to perform the same pleasurable action again, and again, and again. We all also know, by now, that a brain stimulated by pornography releases pleasure-giving endorphins and dopamine. Individuals often become addicted to the euphoria that this chemical cocktail produces, irresistibly coming back to pornographic over, and over, and over again. We know, too, that similar processes are at work with the use of drugs—street or prescription—and drug addiction.

Modern research suggests that the brain releases the same euphoric chemical cocktail in our brain's “pleasure center” during shopping, purchasing, acquiring, accumulating, and

consuming that it does in drinking, gambling, taking drugs, and viewing pornography for pornography or substance abuse. The neurotransmitter, dopamine, surges when we even consider buying something new.

Our American society, with its consumer economy, is, increasingly, built upon consumerism—as even those who see no harm, but only virtue in such an economy, admit. The economy, which has become, essentially, an idolatrous god, goes up and down, depending upon how diligently we obey materialistic laws and impulses to acquire. Watching our society’s enthusiastic struggle to acquire, we might be forgiven for wondering whether our entire society and many of us, its citizenry, are, in fact, addicted to the principle of acquiring, victims of euphoria producing and addictive endorphins and dopamine. We see nothing in it unhealthy, don’t recognize it as an addiction, because we are all in the same doped up state, addicted to the same drug. If we are all addicted, then it must not be addiction.

Such unwillingness to admit that we have a problem is, of course, typical. The addict always thinks they have things under control. But, once in a while, there is a moment of unusual honesty.

“How can you say,
‘I am not defiled;
I have not run after the Baals’?
See how you behaved in the valley;
consider what you have done.
You are a swift she-camel
running here and there,
a wild donkey accustomed to the desert,
sniffing the wind in her craving—
in her heat who can restrain her?
Any males that pursue her need not tire themselves;
at mating time they will find her.

Do not run until your feet are bare
and your throat is dry.
But you said,
‘It’s no use!
I love foreign gods,
and I must go after them.’”⁷

Here, then, is the prophet’s take on ancient fertility, its modern equivalent being the modern materialistic and consumptive drive.

Yes, the inconsistent and befuddling behavior of the American consumer can reasonably be chalked up to addiction. We are a culture of shopping addicts. And just as with any addiction, it takes more and more of the stimulant to maintain the desired highs. Dissatisfaction with the current fix and the need and demand for even more stimulation are inevitable. Hence, one reason the American consumer’s gloomy outlook and pessimistic perspective in the face of bounty that surpasses anything human society has ever seen.

All things are become slippery

As I hear and read of consumers’ pessimistic grumblings about the economy, my mind naturally turns to the Book of Mormon and the consumers of Helaman 13. I have discussed these consumers and their consumption in detail elsewhere.⁸ But, here, I liken their experiences and feelings to those of the American consumer.

Samuel the Lamanite foresees, or “forehears” the consumers of his day. He hears them “weep and howl.” He hears them “lament” that their “riches... have become slippery” and “are gone from us.” “Behold,” they lament, “we lay a tool here and on the morrow it is gone; and behold, our swords are taken from us in the day we have sought them for battle. Yea, we have hid up our treasures and they have slipped away from us, because of the curse of the

⁷ Jeremiah 2:23-25, NIV

⁸ See my homily on Helaman 13, entitled, “Society’s Slippery Slope” in the archive found on our Homilies and Just Society pages of this site.

land.”

One hears in the American consumer’s pessimism an echo of this ancient and sad refrain,

“All things are become slippery, and we cannot hold them.”⁹

Samuel informs them of the real reason for the unhappiness and pessimism.

“Ye have sought all the days of your lives for that which ye could not obtain; and ye have sought for happiness in doing iniquity, which thing is contrary to the nature of that righteousness which is in our great and Eternal Head.”¹⁰

Conclusion

So it is with the American consumer. The consumption, having become in many cases a sinful addiction, cannot produce happiness—indeed, the consumption itself, with its deleterious impacts on the environment and the world’s poor, is sinful and bound to bring unhappiness through natural disasters, the devaluing and dehumanization of others, and human conflict. Anytime the consumer’s consumptive and consuming addiction is in anyway hampered, slowed, or reduced pessimism quite naturally ensues. It feels like things are slipping away from us.

Prophets, priests, and pastors have been asleep at the switch when it comes to addressing this most pervasive addiction in human history. They have no hesitation in screaming bloody murder about a few hundreds of thousands that might be addicted to pornography or a handful of substances, but they remain strangely silent about an addiction that afflicts billions of the globe’s inhabitants—an addiction that creates far, far more suffering than all the other addictions combined. Do they not see the addiction and its harmful effects on society? Or are they, perhaps, themselves caught up in the addiction to one degree or another?

⁹ See Helaman 13.³²⁻³⁷.

¹⁰ Hel. 13.³⁸

“His watchmen are blind:
they are all ignorant,
they are all dumb dogs,
they cannot bark;
sleeping, lying down,
loving to slumber.
Yea, they are greedy dogs
which can never have enough,
and they are shepherds that cannot understand:
they all look to their own way,
every one for his gain, from his quarter.”¹¹

These recalcitrant and silent modern prophets, priests, and pastors could learn a thing or two from the Hebrew prophets about the evils of idolatrous consumption and how to address it. Here, is a sampling.

“You are they who lie upon ivory divans,
sprawl out on your settees,
eat lambs from flocks,
and specially fed calves,
pluck on the harp
as Dāwid, invent for themselves musical instruments,
drink wine by the bowl full,
apply the best of perfumes,
while remaining unaffected by the nation’s collapse.”¹²

¹¹ Isaiah 56.¹⁰⁻¹¹

¹² Amos 6.⁴⁻⁶, author’s translation

“That saith,
‘I will build me a wide house
and large chambers,’
And cutteth him out windows;
and it is cieled with cedar,
and painted with vermilion.”¹³

“I will tear down the winter house
along with the summer house;
the houses adorned with ivory will be destroyed
and the mansions will be demolished,”
declares the LORD.”¹⁴

We could use such voices. No, they would not be welcome any more than Samuel the Lamanite was. But the call is clear, and the need is great. Warnings about the addictive nature of consumerism could squelch a host of accompanying evils. Warnings about the addictive nature of consumerism could bring happiness, true happiness that far surpasses all the transitory dopamine highs that money and its purchasing power can buy.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

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¹³ Jeremiah 22.¹⁴

¹⁴ Amos 3.¹⁵