

Living in a material world

God doesn't hate stuff. God *invents* stuff.

July 13, 2010

New York City is popularly designated the global capital of Mammon, the most crassly material economic zone in a crassly materialistic world. Though I am naturally defensive about the city I call home, I can understand why people think this way. When they think of New York, most people think of Wall Street excess, overpriced Madison Avenue boutiques, nose-bleed expensive restaurants, and hotel rooms that cost as much for a night as a three-bedroom house in Muncie rents for a month.

The truth about New York is more nuanced. Some members of my congregation are very wealthy; others are retired teachers, would-be actors, computer techies, or young lawyers who are working 70-hour weeks and barely paying the rent. The people I serve as pastor are generally no more or less materialistic than people in the congregations I served in the Midwest. The New York of outsized bonuses and multimillion-dollar duplex apartments is but garden-variety human acquisitiveness writ large. Nevertheless, as a pastor in the putative seat of Mammon where acquisitiveness can be very large indeed, I have found myself challenged to think more deeply about “stuff” than ever before. And just as the truth about New York is not so simple, the truth about what we too casually name “materialism” is not so simple either.

In the go-go 1980s, the chanteuse who'd named herself Madonna infamously confessed in song that she was “a material girl,” and that we are all “living in a material world” (repeat chorus and fade). Less famously, and long before she became Madonna, she was a talented little girl from Michigan named Louise Ciccone who, though not a church member, sang and danced in the Christmas-pageant-on-steroids that was mounted annually at my former congregation.

How tragic, you sigh, that the pretty girl in the church Christmas pageant ended up singing to the glories of materialism like a pop Ayn Rand with a bleach job. This

critique echoes the routine laments that name materialism as the sum of the human problem. This is an analysis that invites the corollary suggestion that in order for all to be well, all we really need to do is be more spiritual. What I have come to believe, however, is that materialism is not exactly the problem, and that being more spiritual is not exactly the answer.

It ought to be clear that God doesn't hate stuff. Witness the creation story. God—none other—invents stuff. At the end of each of the six days of creation, God engages in self-congratulation. In litany fashion, God pronounces serial evening benedictions on the stuff created by the Divine word that day: "Good!" God says five days running, and then, on the sixth, "Very good!" "God," Robert Farrar Capon once quipped, "is the biggest materialist there is. He invented stuff. . . . He likes it even better than we do."

Witness the Nativity story. Incarnation is not about separating the spiritual from the material; it's about precisely the opposite. The Spirit of God enters deep into the crass old material world of real stuff and fleshly people. The Nativity story is strategically loaded with loving material detail at every plot turn: a baby born too soon to an unwed mother, the sounds and colors and smells of labor and delivery, the ripe odor of straw and animals and dung and unwashed shepherds fresh from the hills, the frank materiality of the rich gifts of the Magi.

Witness the adult Jesus who is accused of being a glutton and a wine bibber, the Jesus who heals physical bodies, the Jesus who dies a dreadfully material death and rises not as some disembodied spirit but with a body—a body of elusive description perhaps, but a body nonetheless. The moral dichotomy between the spiritual as the perfect good and the material as the quintessential evil is simply not a Christian idea; the Gnostics seem to have invented it.

I studied New Testament in seminary with Johan Christian Becker, who was both a seminal Pauline scholar and a riveting classroom lecturer. I'll never forget Becker's lecture on the doctrine of the incarnation. He was merciless in his ridicule of what he named, in his Dutch accent, "da swoop down teory." The swoop-down theory was, to Becker, any notion that this material world of ours is normatively void of God and that only in the years of Jesus' life among us does God "swoop down" to inhabit, for but a while, our usually godless materiality. What Becker argued for, and what I believe scripture witnesses to, is a theology that understands the incarnation as the definitive sign, in one time and place, of the ever-presence of the Living God within

God's good material creation.

This leads me to the most pregnant of ironies I have come to embrace about materiality. The problem, I think, is not so much that we like stuff too much; rather it's that we don't like it enough. Before you cry heresy, let me explain. We acquire things, but then quickly tire of the things that seemed so important when first obtained. We replace rather than repair because we have such fickle and passing romances with our things. The real soul danger is not exactly in liking things too much, nor in owning them, nor in caring for them well. In fact, there can be great virtue in such a caring relationship with physical things.

The soul danger lies in the insatiable longing to acquire new things one after another, more and more things, as if the getting of them somehow proves our worth in comparison with others, as if the having of them can fill the emptiness. It's this insatiable drive to acquire stuff rather than the stuff itself that's the problem.

The attempt to stuff more and more stuff into that unfilled place in our souls that only God can fill becomes, of course, idolatry—making what God made into god. The problem is not that this is a material world. Madonna got that part right; it is a material world. God made it that way, and as God said repeatedly, it is good, in fact very good. In Jesus Christ, God has definitively entered into that very good materiality to claim it, bless it and transform it.