

*The Ninth Sunday After Pentecost*  
*Proper 10, Revised Common Lectionary, Year A*

*July 13<sup>th</sup>, 2008*

*Episcopal Church of Our Saviour*  
*Mill Valley, California*

*A State of Consuming*  
*(or Some iPhone Theology)*  
*The Rev. Richard E. Helmer*

All right, so I begin this morning with a confession. Anyone who knows me very well at all recognizes I'm a techie, or a geek, or a technology nerd, or someone who simply enjoys gadgets. Pick your term. They all apply. Anyone who knows me very well knows that I spend a good deal of time on my iPhone. Yep, there it is: my iPhone. If you were to follow me during the day, you might think I was expecting a phone call, or a text message, or an e-mail, or a new web page from no one other than God! It's over the top. I'm hooked.

This past Friday I rose early with designs on the AT&T store in San Rafael. It was the day the new improved iPhone was hitting the stores, and Apple had done what it always does best – generated fanatical demand for their newest, latest, coolest product. Sure enough, I got to the AT&T store at 6:45 pm, credit card in my pocket, to find a line of nearly forty people already there, Starbucks cups in hand, waiting outside the door to be among the first to have the new iPhone launching at 8:00 am sharp. There was laughter, a bit of embarrassment, a few quarters for the parking meter, and I was in line, too, feeling smug as more and more people filed behind me.

If you think it's a bit silly, you're right. Apple had created in me and a million other people a rather expensive iPhone-shaped hole. We were bound and determined to get one to fill that little void. And, literally for Christ's sake, I have one already, only a year old! One that works just fine, thank you very much. Maybe not as fast as the new one, maybe not as snazzy. It doesn't have GPS, either, but it holds its own. But I'd been pining away for the new model for weeks, fed by a steady stream of advertising and commentary online, the happy sales pitch of a guy with glasses in a plain black sweater telling me how convenient, compact, productive and efficient my life would be with the shiny new piece of plastic with a glass screen and a computer chip inside my pocket.

For an hour, I enjoyed talking with the people around me in line. The lady with the two dogs (who apparently needed iPhones, too) and her son. They were having a lively chat about whether or not they could upgrade based on their current cellular plan, and whether the new data plan was worth it. The father and his son in front of me talked about all the new programs that could now be downloaded to the gadget. The lady in front of them was furiously scribbling down all the phone numbers from her old iPhone's address book. She'd dropped hers in water a few weeks earlier. It didn't turn off any more, and she couldn't synchronize it with her computer, so she had to turn to the archaic mode of pen and paper or she'd lose all her important data. I felt a bit sorry for her.

Sales people from the store came out to chat with us in line. To make sure we understood all that was required of us to get our hands on the new gadget. To make sure we understood our choices. To make change for the parking meters. To make us as comfortable as possible as we desperately waited for the generous hospitality in the shiny, clean store so they could take our money and our signature on the two-year contract that the new machine demands.

I worked on my sermon while standing in line, and then began pondering what it meant that I was there. At 8:00 am the doors opened, and AT&T began processing the new iPhone customers five at a time, promising an average of 10 minutes per customer. In denial, I adamantly refused to do the time math for awhile. At 8:15 the line, already slow, slowed further. At 8:30, it had ground almost to a halt. The rolling launch of the new iPhone around the world was clogging up Apple's systems,

the computers stopped talking to one another, and people were looking down the gauntlet of waiting 2, 3, 4 hours in line to get the device. Everybody was on their earlier iPhone models canceling appointments and moving the day's schedule around. Thing was, I couldn't do that. At 8:45 I had to come back to Mill Valley. Morning Prayer was on the agenda as well as a memorial service. I had to print my sermon, and there was much to be done in the office. I was heartsick. No time Friday to get a new iPhone! And didn't I *deserve* one?

"For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit," Paul writes the Church in Rome in today's Epistle. We ignore him at our own peril, don't we? For Paul, "flesh" is a technical theological term, one that appears intended to encompass all in our nature that opposes or ignores the life that God offers. "Flesh" means our addiction to all that is not God, to our quixotic pursuit of *more* with the insistence of scarcity biting at our heels, chasing us into selfish ambition. "Flesh" is the focus of our energies on that which cannot ultimately nurture us or give us true life.

Last week, I received an e-mail from a parishioner reflecting on what it meant that some very clever folk in the EPA had determined that the average American life is worth about \$6.9 million in today's dollars. That's down, by the way, by about \$1 million from 5 years ago. I wonder if that means the average has been dragged down by increasing poverty, less wealth, or the economic downturn. In any case, now we have a baseline on which the EPA can determine the efficacy of potential environmental legislation. Here's the math: Say a proposed piece of environmental policy costs industry \$40 billion to save only \$30 billion worth of human lives, the government might want to reconsider. It wouldn't be economically practical. Hey, you can't make this stuff up. It was on the radio near the top of the news this morning. Even George Orwell would have, well, a run for his money.

While at two friends' wedding reception yesterday in Pacifica, someone asked me what living in Marin was like. I said that living in Marin was an interesting state of being sometimes. Then I said almost without thinking, half tongue-in-cheek, it could also be a "state of consuming." Isn't that true? Uncomfortably so? It is for me. But it's not just true of Marin. It's across the country. It's in Europe, Latin America, China, Japan, India. It's continuing to make inroads into Africa.

With the economy, the housing market, the stock market, the consumer market all down for a time (well, expect perhaps Apple's) we're all suffering symptoms of withdrawal. Yet our sufferings are nothing compared with much of the world's population as food prices soar and resources become scarce as our voracious appetite for things strips the land and empties the oceans. And yet my life and yours is commoditized and slapped with a dollar value, too. We risk seeing others, if those in power get wicked enough to trust only the narrow logic of pure numbers. . . we risk seeing others or even ourselves as *expendable*. As though we can be weighed in the scales of scarcity and supply and demand and then be determined worthy or not of life itself.

That's living according to the flesh, of course. It causes us to forget what is important. It blinds us to the realities that demand our true hearts and God-given selves. For me, it is the choice between sleep, prayer, and focused work or standing in line madly salivating along with the die-hard fans for the latest iPhone. How silly it sounds to say such a thing before the altar of God! Our God who seems, through the eyes of flesh, to be such a poor judge of worth. Our God who picks foolish brothers like Jacob and Esau, exchanging birthrights for a bowl of pottage, to give rise to nations. Our God who chooses a murderer to lead God's people out of bondage, a stinking shepherd to be a king, and a poor carpenter's fiancée to birth a largely illiterate Messiah who will be nailed to a tree. And turning to today's Gospel, I want to say, "Come off it Jesus!" No good farmer would dare waste seed, but the sower ignores the well-tilled, carefully measured furrows and flings it about with wasteful abandon.

As I left the line for the iPhone on Friday, I said goodbye to the people I had gotten to know a little in that hour-and-a-half. "Sorry," said one man to me, with a look of true pity that I had to go to work, and I wouldn't be getting my hands on the new gadget that morning. "Yeah," I said, "me

too.” But not really, I realized on the way home, glancing at my older model on the dash. For this little empty iPhone-shaped hole was an entry point for God, and through that grace I began to wake up. I noticed the hills, the people clamoring to work, the clouds, the sky, the sunshine. I noticed once again that I was preparing to lead a memorial service for someone who had given her lifetime so that countless children could have healthy lives in our community. How could I forget the blessings that I have received, that the fields all around are rich with the grain planted by the Sower, nourished by a creation that doesn’t toil in assembly lines or work out market strategies or weigh the cost of every action, every individual?

My brothers and sisters, take the warning from our spiritual ancestor and brother Paul: Our economy and the oft touted “American Way of Life” is largely of the flesh – it has a great deal of illusion at its heart. It is all about human-assigned value. 8 GB iPhone for \$199, 16 GB iPhone for \$299. Convenience, market value, and economy of scale are assigned not by God, but by those carefully balancing the exchange of equity, goods, and services. If we obsess there, we can lose our humanity, we can get the proverbial cart before the horse, we can forget the life of the Spirit we have been given through baptism and we lose sight of every way, small and great, that we have been loved into being, and how we are called to share that love with others.

And when we truly return home in our hearts, families, friends, neighborhoods and communities, we are met by a God who is so abundantly crazy in economic terms that the seed is planted everywhere. A God who explodes our supply and demand apparatus with the simple formula of grace: the supply of God’s love for us and for all Creation is infinite and unbounded. Perhaps the silver lining of this economic downturn is that it is a reality check, a graceful opportunity to get back in touch with what is important. A chance to really help those who are truly in need, and tend our wayward hearts and our deepest longings for a God who loves us.

Think about the economics of consumption for Christians this way:

We call a small portion of bread and a sip of wine God – Christ’s flesh and blood – spiritual things to which we are called to set our minds upon and literally consume. . . Consume so that we may return to being made in God’s image, more Christ-like, more imbued with grace for a world in true need.

And around this tiny sacrifice, worth not even pennies to the EPA or any other sensible government or economic agency, is built the compassion and love that truly nourishes our lives. That satisfies me in a way that no shiny new iPhone ever could. That calls me to give it up for greater things. And that is what God and I agreed to on the way back from San Rafael, Highway 101 our path, the draw of true need here at home guiding the turns. It took God awhile to break through all the hype, but there God was.

So the seeds are being sown. What kind of soil shall we be? Or shall we merely lay down and be a path on which the economic engines of this world roll? I leave that question to you, my sisters and brothers in Christ, and to your God who loves you and wants us all: you and me, and all our neighbors and strangers whole.

*Amen.*