

7 Epiphany Sermon
The Rev. Megan Dembi

Has everyone here seen the show Shark Tank? It's a show on ABC where small-business entrepreneurs pitch a product to extremely wealthy potential investors, while the investors make dry or witty comments about the presenters and their products. The goal for these entrepreneurs is to get one of these wealthy investors, known as sharks, to literally buy into their product and help launch the product to make millions. If you've watched the show, you probably know of a guy named Mark Cuban, who, in addition to being one of the sharks on this popular show, is also the owner of the Dallas Mavericks basketball team. Though Mark Cuban is now obviously incredibly wealthy, he came from humble beginnings. His grandparents emigrated to the US from Russia and Romania, and he grew up in a humble suburb outside of Pittsburgh. Cuban's parents were not wealthy, but Cuban was very motivated to be successful. He worked through college, eventually earning a business degree, and after some fairly unsuccessful career attempts, Cuban started a technology company, which he eventually sold for millions. Continuing in that entrepreneurial spirit and success, he then co-founded another company which came to be known as Broadcast.com, which he eventually sold for BILLIONS in Yahoo! stock. Cuban bought the Dallas Mavericks in 2000 and he continues to invest and create companies and explores options to buy other sports teams. Coupled with his role on the show Shark Tank, Cuban has gained both wealth and fame.

Though there are a lot of people who don't like Mark Cuban, most people would probably consider him to be successful. He's even made it onto Forbes' list of the World's Richest People. Some may not like him as a person, but most people would look at how he's transformed his humble beginnings into a multi-billion dollar empire and think, "Well this guy must be pretty smart, he must be pretty wise." And if we're judging Cuban by the world's standards, we'd pretty much have to agree. Mark Cuban is essentially a self-made man, is extremely wealthy, and is known in the public sphere. Whether people like him or not, he has power and influence. What more does the world ask for when judging who is successful? Who is wise?

However, if we are to judge who is successful and who is wise from a Christian perspective, our criteria would be completely different. "For the wisdom of this world is foolishness with God." Though this world may look at someone who is a wealthy business person and famous and assume that that person must be wise, the way God views wisdom, and therefore the way Christians should view wisdom is different. Though the wisdom of the world may tell us to hold tightly to our possessions, God's wisdom tells us "You shall not strip your vineyard bare...you shall leave them for the poor." Though the wisdom of the world may tell us to push away or fear the foreigner among us, God's wisdom tells us, "You shall not...gather the fallen grapes of your vineyard; you shall leave them for....the alien." While the wisdom of the world may tell us it's alright to take advantage of others sometimes in order to make a profit, the wisdom of God tells us, "you shall not defraud your neighbor."

No, the world does not judge wisdom as God does. The wisdom of the world tells us we should strive to be wealthy. The wisdom of God tells us that we should strive to be holy. "You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy," we hear in Isaiah. And to be holy often means going against the wisdom of the world, even doing things the world would consider to be foolish. "You should become fools so that you may become wise," Paul tells us. And Christ explains to us how being holy in the eyes of God will often make us look foolish to others.

"You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also...Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you....You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, Love your

enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven.” Though the world may tell us it is wise to seek revenge against wrongdoing against us, Christ tells us to turn the other cheek. Though the world may tell us it is wise to keep our wealth for ourselves, Christ tells us to give to beggars and lend to those in need. Though the world may tell us it is wise to hate and revile our enemies, Christ tells us to love our enemies, and to pray for those who persecute us. In this way we will follow the wisdom of God and be children of our Father in heaven, rather than children of the world.

To be wise in the ways of God, to be holy as God is holy, means acting in ways that the world might consider to be foolish, perhaps even dangerous. It means sharing our wealth with the less fortunate and with foreigners. It means not automatically responding to wrongdoing by seeking revenge. It means acting towards others out of love, even those who do not pay us the same respect and courtesy. It means praying even for those who persecute us. The world tells us this is foolishness. That this is a ridiculous way to live life. But we Christians are not to live our lives as others would. “For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same?” No, we Christians are commanded to not live as others live, but instead to be holy, to “Be perfect, therefore, as [our] heavenly Father is perfect.”

We could seek to live successful glamorous lives like that of Mark Cuban, and we would be seen as wise in the ways of the world. Yet as Christians, we are commanded to strive for something different, to strive for something more. Though Mark Cuban does give millions to charity and comes from a Jewish background, I don’t know enough to comment on his life beyond that. But to live as a good Christian, one must even go beyond giving money to good causes. Living as a Christian, living in a way that display’s God’s wisdom, living in a way that is holy, encompasses so much more than what we do with our finances—it deals with what we do with our *lives* in every aspect of our lives. Whether it’s using our resources to help the less fortunate, putting aside thoughts of revenge and instead seeking reconciliation, or treating not only our neighbors, but even our enemies with love and respect, living as a Christian often means living in a way that is contrary to how the world would tell us to live, even contrary to how we ourselves would want to live. Because Christians, just like anyone else, can become overwhelmed by what the world teaches us we should want and what the world teaches us what to do. But that just gives us even more reason to seek out God’s wisdom, to seek out what is holy, to seek to be perfect as our heavenly Father is perfect, to seek to act out of love above all else. Christ has taught us that without love whatever we do is worth nothing. Let us walk in love as Christ loved us and gave himself for us in offering and sacrifice to God. Amen.