

"Show Me the Money"

First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee, Florida

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HOW MUCH LAND?

In Tolstoy's famous short story, "How Much Land Does a Man Need?" a Russian peasant was told that he could have all the land he could walk around in the time between sunup and sundown.

So, with the rising of the sun the peasant began walking as fast as he could. By mid-morning it seemed he was moving too slowly. So he increased his pace and didn't even stop for lunch.

As the afternoon heat beat down on him he hurried his pace even more. He felt that he simply must circle more and more land. By late afternoon he was soaked with sweat from head toe. He had walked around a huge section of land, but he still wanted more.

So, he began to run. Breathlessly he pushed himself into a fatigue he had never known. His heart beat wildly. As sundown approached, he ran even faster. Only a few more steps and he would be the largest landholder in the district.

But, before he could make it those few steps, he fell to the ground dead.

How much land does a man or woman need? How much money is enough? What price are we willing to pay in order to get what we want?

SHOW ME THE MONEY?

This past week the Miami Dolphins received some bad news. Their star running back, Ricky Williams decided to "retire" in his prime. People and in particular, sportscasters were flabbergasted by the decision. How could he walk away from all that money?

The Orlando Sentinel ran an article about other athletes who had the audacity to quit in their prime. According to the article all of these early retirees had two prominent characteristics. They were very bright, and they tended to be unconventional in their approach to life.

I loved to watch Ricky Williams run. He was an exciting football player. But, I must say that his decision to be motivated by something other than money strikes me as a decision that more people should emulate.

Remember that slogan from the movie, Jerry McGuire? "Show me the money" was the mantra of the young athlete that Jerry represented. And many people, athletes and non-athletes alike have adopted that slogan as their own creed. Show me the money. Give me what I want, and then I'll be happy.

But, of course it never works that way. There's more to life than money, and, more than that, the love of money can keep us from discovering what is really important.

THE BIBLE AND MONEY

Paul wrote in his first letter to Timothy, "For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, and in their eagerness to be rich some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pains."

1 Tim. 6: 10 (NRSV)

That's what today's Scripture lesson teaches us. It reminds us that whether we have a lot of money or a little, it really doesn't really matter in the end. The only thing that matters is how we live and the quality of our relationship with God.

We need to become (as Jesus put it) "rich toward God." Being rich toward God means approaching God as hungry, needy people and letting God give us what we need rather than trying to get it on our own.

The Bible has a lot to say about money, and what the Bible has to say is quite different from what we hear from the world. When we talk about money, it's usually because we want more of it. But, when the Bible talks about money, it's usually to criticize someone who either has too much money or wants too much money.

I think that today's lesson applies to us all because when it comes to greed, all of us are like alcoholics and their desire for alcohol. There is always the possibility of a relapse.

More things are motivated by greed than this world dreams of, and we must always be on guard against this evil power in our lives. We must always be suspicious of our true motives.

GREED ENCOURAGED

But, the critic might well ask, "What is so bad about wanting more? Isn't our economy based on having just a little bit more?" You better believe it. According to some it's the American dream. It's certainly the dream drummed into us from an early age.

If you take a small child into Toys-R-Us, you won't have to teach the child what to do. Barney and Disney have already taught them that there is no higher calling than consumption.

I've always thought that we're naturals when it comes to greed, but we also live in a world where greed is skillfully encouraged. The advertisers know their business.

I had trouble sleeping the other night, and you know what they were selling on TV? They were selling a new kind of "space age" mattress that would end my sleepless nights forever. I was ready to call the operators who were standing by in the middle of the night.

If you think you don't have a need, that's not problem. They'll invent one for you. How about "gingivitis," dandruff or the "heartbreak of psoriasis?" The reason we are so vulnerable to the salesman's pitch is that we don't really know what we want. Like the man in Jesus' parable we just want more.

According to modern culture, you can never have a barn that's too big or a house that's too palatial. There's always something "new and improved" that we must simply acquire.

CONSUMPTION MACHINES

Do you remember that scene in the movie, "Jaws" when they catch and kill a huge shark, the animal that is called "a vast eating machine"?

They take the shark into a marine laboratory, and cut it open. Out of the stomach among other things comes a bunch of half-eaten fish, an old tire, bones, a piece of a boat, a clock and even a license plate!

A minister said that at that point in the movie he exclaimed, "That's my congregation!"

I'm sure the folks in the theatre wondered what kind of nut case they were sitting near.

But, what he meant is quite understandable. Just as the shark in Jaws was an indiscriminate eating machine, so many of us have turned into indiscriminate consumption machines. Many of us are so hungry, so full of indiscriminate desire. We go after everything.

Did you ever wonder why? Why are we never satisfied? Where do we get this burning desire for something more? I think that our problem is not that we want too much. The problem is that we settle for far too little. We are forever trying to fill a spiritual need with material comfort. And it just never works.

More than that, our greed literally kills us. Our insatiable desire for bigger barns drains the life out of us. We become people who have no personal or spiritual depth. We become empty shells who are willing to burn any bridge and do almost anything to get what we want.

REFUSING TO PARTICIPATE

In our lesson for today, a man came to Jesus with a problem. He wanted his brother to divide the family inheritance with him, and he wanted Jesus as a Rabbi to oversee the process.

It was common in those days for respected teachers to take on this kind of job, much as lawyers are sometimes called in when there is a dispute about an inheritance. So calling in Jesus was the equivalent of calling in Bogin, Muns and Muns or Morgan, Colling, and Gilbert.

Every time I read this passage I can't help but think about families that are torn apart over money when a loved one dies. This was a problem in Jesus' day, and it's a problem in our day as well.

You know what happens. The siblings hire lawyers, squabble for years over the terms of their parent's will, and in the end there is not much left that wasn't given to their lawyers.

Jesus refused to participate in a situation like that. Instead, Jesus used this dispute as an opportunity to teach. He told the people,

"Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions."

According to Jesus, the trouble with greed is that it keeps us from having an abundant life. The desire for things keeps us from concentrating on what is really important. Greed keeps us from really living.

A NEW VANTAGE POINT

A good way to counter the power of greed is to ask the question that Jesus asks through his parable. "How important will this be when I come to the end of my life?"

This past week I read the faith history of a minister who will be joining our presbytery. He said that he really didn't understand the depths of his faith until he was told by the doctor, "You have leukemia."

He wrote, "Suddenly the things I thought were important just the day before weren't that important anymore. The only things that mattered now were the people in my life and how I could spend each moment I had loving them and showing others God's love for them."

He continued,

"The remorse was the worst part. Looking back over my life, I saw missed opportunities and wasted time.... I was completely broken, and I asked for forgiveness for the wrong things done and the right things undone."

Fortunately some experimental treatments have worked with this young man, and he is now able to continue as a minister.

But, I think that his reaction is fairly typical. We see our life from a whole new perspective in the light of our impending mortality. What's that phrase we often hear? "Nobody ever wishes that they spent more time at the office on their deathbed?"

JESUS DOESN'T CARE

This is what Jesus desperately wants His disciples to understand, and He uses some rather extreme methods to get his point across.

A woman told her rather prickly old pastor,

"I need to seek your counsel."

"About what," he asked.

She replied,

"Well, my boss has offered me a promotion. It's flattering, but it would require a move, and I'm away from the kids so much already. I just need some help thinking it through."

The pastor cut her off short,
"You don't need to talk to me!
Jesus doesn't care about all that stuff!"

As you can imagine, the woman was not happy. She stormed home vowing to never enter that church again. But, then the woman, who knew her Bible, began to think about what the pastor had said.

She thought about this particular passage and said to herself, "I guess what he meant to say was that Jesus doesn't care about my upward mobility. Those sorts of things just don't interest Jesus.

And maybe they shouldn't interest me either."

I know this is hard to take, but a lot of what interests us doesn't interest Jesus.

Jesus is not interested in people who make millions building skyscrapers, bouncing basketballs or swinging golf clubs.

Jesus' favorite TV show would not be "Who Wants to be a Millionaire."

Jesus would have no desire to read Donald Trump's new book.

All that stuff that fascinates us.

It doesn't interest Jesus.

G.K. Chesterton once wrote,

"Now we could have quite a good debate over whether or not Jesus believed in fairies. That would be a matter of which we could have endless speculative discussion.

However, there is no debate to be had over whether or not Jesus believed that rich people were in big trouble. The evidence in Scripture is just too great, there are too many stories. Jesus said too much on the subject."

THE HARD TRUTH

According to Jesus, many of those whom we consider to be heroes are "fools. They are investing their life in something that will not, at least in the long run, pay any dividends.

And, we need to watch out because the same could be true of us as well.

One preacher described it this way,

"If I were asked, 'Why do you think the American family is in trouble?' I wouldn't cite Hollywood's sex and violence in the movies.

I would say materialism. Lots of my people are literally working themselves to death, working themselves out of a marriage, working themselves out of a family."

Given how we as a society have sold our soul to materialism many people are, quite understandably, having psychological problems. We are anxious. We feel guilty about not spending enough time with our children. Some of us come to Jesus looking for help.

And Jesus gives us help. Jesus helps us by telling us the hard truth about our greedy ways. Jesus tells us,

"I'm not worried about your portfolio. I'm not worried about your post modern angst. I'm worried about your soul. I'm worried about your relationship with God because that is more important than anything else."

A DIFFERENT WAY

Most of us are here today because we suspect that this is true. We suspect that there is more to life than being "healthy, wealthy and wise." If we didn't, we'd be at the beach working on our tan with everyone else.

But, our encounter with Jesus has changed us.

We believe that there is more to life than a day at the beach. We believe that there is more to life than a meal at Red Lobster or a drink with good friends at the local pub.

The Scripture doesn't tell us what happened to the man who asked Jesus to intervene the dispute over the inheritance. I suspect that he was able to find other "Rabbis" who were more sympathetic to his case.

There are always people around who are quite willing to tell us what we want to hear, that we "deserve a break today," that we "only go around once in life so we have to grab for all the gusto that we can get."

But, Jesus won't tell us that. Jesus is not interested in pandering to our greed. Jesus won't answer questions that trivialize and demean the lives we are meant to live.

Instead, Jesus leads to ask different questions, questions that are worth asking, questions about what is really true and worthwhile and lasting.

Through the wisdom and grace of Jesus we can learn what is worth living for and, more importantly, we can also learn what is worth dying for.

Again we come to the mystery and the challenge of communion. We have a king whose throne is a cross and whose greatest accomplishment was to die for those he loved.

The world has always thought such sacrifice to be foolishness.

But, long after the millionaires and billionaires of our generation are forgotten, people will still find hope and new life and forgiveness in this eternal king.

Without him we too would fritter our lives away on foolish things, trying to get more and more because our hearts are empty.

But, Jesus feeds us more than a line.
He feeds us this bread and this drink.
Body broken and blood shed tell of us a greater way and a greater life.

Let us take up our cross and follow Him.

Amen.