

“How Much?”

WORDS of FAITH: Contentment

Genesis 12:1-2 and 1 Timothy 6:6-10

Sunday, October 22, 2017

Covenant Presbyterian Church, Madison WI

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If you were driving down a road with hairpin turns and huge potholes, you would be grateful for the warning signs that urge you to slow down and be careful. If there were no warning signs, you and others would be in great danger. But when we see warning signs to let us know about danger, we can make proper adjustments to be safe.

Sometimes the Bible gives us warning signs, letting us know about things that are dangerous.

Today's reading comes from 1 Timothy, a letter that Paul wrote to Timothy, who is described as a youth in the text. But Paul's words of wisdom and warning are good for people of any age. The question for us is whether we make proper adjustments.

Listen for God's word.

⁶Of course, there is great gain in godliness combined with contentment; ⁷for we brought nothing into the world, so that we can take nothing out of it; ⁸but if we have food and clothing, we will be content with these. ⁹But those who want to be rich fall into temptation and are trapped by many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. ¹⁰For 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.

When I was a kid, I got excited every year in December, when we saw in the TV guide that “The Grinch Who Stole Christmas” was going to be on. At the appointed time, we sat together in front of the TV and watched. Same with Rudolph, Frosty, and of course Charlie Brown. We saw those shows once a year, and that was good.

At some point, we got a VCR, with the ability to record shows on big cassettes, and with the option of going to a store to rent a video. Wow. This was awesome! If we rent the video, or record the show, we can watch these programs whenever we wanted and however many times we wanted!

Then came DVD's, slimmer and with better functionality—you didn't have to rewind it! And then came DVD's by mail. You could get almost any movie you wanted in just a couple of days.

Then came instant streaming, with the option to watch just about anything on our TV's, our tablets, and our smart phones just like that.

And yet despite these incredible changes, allowing us to watch almost any movie or show ever produced, sometimes we complain that there's "nothing to watch" or that we have to go to the library to borrow a video, or pay a few bucks to watch a movie.

While there were no movies or internet streaming services 2000 ago, apparently learning to be content was a struggle in the time of Jesus.

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At a conference this summer, I learned about a new development in our consumer culture. A certain online retailer that can currently ship you almost anything in two days is now starting to make deliveries within one hour, in certain urban areas across the county. That's right one hour.

While I'm amazed by the efficiency and technology, what concerns me is the marketing.



Billboards in California make the promise: ZERO to happy in one hour

Think about the message. Without the book, or the sweater, or toy or stuffed animal, of technological gadget, you are ZERO. But presto, in one hour, thanks to the acquisition of a new thing, you are HAPPY.

Is that really how it works?

Over the years I have led about 15 mission trips to Central America with teens and adults, with most of them in rural communities, to help with a community project—maybe a school, or new houses, or a church. Through partnership with Presbyterian World Mission workers, we would get connected with these communities and spend a 4-6 days sharing and growing together. We spent

our time working together, playing together, sharing together, worshipping together—with people who have a lot less stuff than we do.

Typically, people live in houses about the size of a one car garage, with no electricity and limited access to clean water. There have been times when I wonder if I have more clothes in my duffle bag than the people in some of these communities.

What is wonderful to see is how much fun we can have with a tennis ball, a game of duck-duck-goose, or singing in Spanish and English. What humbles me is to see how much appreciation these people have of clean water, a school for the kids, or a floor that isn't made of mud.

We experience the joy of a community like this and we come home with questions. One of the most common questions for people who have had experiences like this is: How much is enough? How much stuff do we really need?

The people in Honduras had so much less and seemed a lot happier.

Now, I am aware of the danger of romanticizing poverty. Life in such conditions is hard, without good access to clean water, good healthcare, regular education.

But life is also hard when we constantly striving for more, never feeling like we have enough, never learning to be content.

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A few years ago, I read about a book called *Richistan: A Journey Through the American Wealth Boom and the Lives of the New Rich* written by Robert Frank, a Wall Street Journal columnist. I haven't read the book but I've read about it. He walks the reader through the world of the super-rich in our country—the families with alligator skin toilets, the people wearing jewelry and watches worth more than \$100,000.

One revealing finding was to see how many of the ultra-rich are gripped by anxiety, deeply concerned about running out of money.

According to the review I read, Frank cites a survey where people were asked "How much money would you need to be financially secure?" Those worth \$1 million said they'd need two. Those worth 10 million said they would need 20

million. And yes, those worth 100 million dollars felt they needed 200 million to feel secure. (Source: *Feasting on the Gospels: Matthew*, vol 1, p. 136, commentary by Wallace Bubar)

I don't think many people here are in the \$100 million category, but I do think that pretty much no matter where we are, many of us think we don't have enough.

It's understandable that we feel discontent because of the incessant and loud messages from culture telling us that we need more stuff to be happy: A fancier car, the latest techno-gadgets, the shiniest appliances, the trendiest clothes, and all sorts of Badger and Packer stuff. Ouch.

Some of you are probably thinking that you shouldn't have come to church today.

But I'm not trying to ruin our fun or say that we can't enjoy life. Instead we just need to tap the brakes and be careful.

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Several months ago, the Washington Post published a reflection piece by two University of Virginia religion scholars called "Being rich wrecks your soul. We used to know that." https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/being-rich-wrecks-your-soul-we-used-to-know-that/2017/07/28/7d3e2b90-5ab3-11e7-9fc6-c7ef4bc58d13_story.html?utm_term=.9ce7be3e7b4d

In that article we see, "The rich seem to have a hard time enjoying simple things, savoring the everyday experiences that make so much of life worthwhile."

If you have the courage to read it, look it up. Every major religion teaches similar ideas, that we have to be careful about material things.

And in our Christian tradition the message is strong and clear, to be careful about possessions and money.

As Christians we are called to simplicity, generosity, contentment.

The ten commandments open with prohibitions against worshipping the wrong things and end with a prohibition against wanting other people's stuff. Thou shalt not covet—thy neighbor's donkey or thy neighbor's big screen TV.

Jesus famously taught that it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than it is for a rich person to get into heaven.

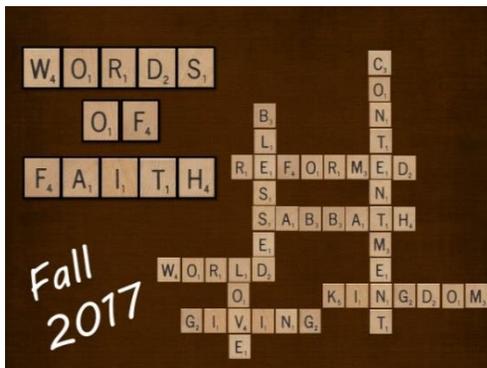
And if you keep reading in 1 Timothy, you see how Paul encourages youthful Timothy to make good choices and to be strong:

But as for you, man of God, shun all this; pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance, gentleness. Fight the good fight of the faith...

And a few verses later, the letter closes with Timothy being urged to take hold of life that really is life.

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In this Words of Faith series, my hope is that you'll find a word or two and spend time pondering that word and being open to what God has to teach you and show you.

Take a word and sit with it. Pray it. Breath in and out with it.

Maybe your word for this week is CONTENTMENT. Or maybe your word is ENOUGH. Or maybe THANK YOU.

Let me encourage you to make some time this week to ponder.

Sit in a comfy chair, with a good book or your knitting needles, or nothing at all, and just be thankful.

Eat a meal slowly, actually tasting your food, with thankfulness.

Take a walk, even a walk in the rain. Give thanks to God for the beauty of autumn and the gift of each day.

We have been blessed with the gift of life, with the gift of today, and with so much more.

Let us pray....