

Series: The Words of Jesus (His Public Teachings)
Today: Words on Wealth and Possessions (Part II)
Text: Luke 12:22-34

A Sermon preached by The Rev. Randolph T. Riggs, D.Min.
Sunday, October 26, 2008
First Presbyterian Church of Lancaster, PA

As I was preparing my message for this morning, I found myself thinking a lot about my father. Had he lived, Dad would have been 92 years old today. He died nearly 27 years ago, and I have been wondering how he would be responding to the economic uncertainty we have been going through in the last few weeks.

Dad didn't like uncertainty. He was an engineer by training, and he liked things to be precise. He wanted to believe there were black and white answers to the complex questions which are posed by the world in which we live. Dad preferred a world where things were simpler. As far as he was concerned, your word was your bond. A handshake was a contract, and if he said he would do something, you could consider it done.

Dad was the son of a carpenter and a Christian Science Practitioner. His father was a simple man who loved to build homes, and he taught my father how to work with his hands. His mother would spend hours on the phone or in her living room providing spiritual guidance to troubled souls. She tried to make a believer of him, but something kept Dad from fully embracing her faith. Her faith was based on simple trust that God was love and that God's love was more powerful than evil, but he had difficulty seeing God at work in the lives of people like she could.

Dad grew up during the depression. He remembered, in detail, the stock market crash of 1929. He remembered hobo camps and people asking for handouts, and he made

a vow to himself that he would never depend on anyone else for anything. He worried a lot about finances, and he was always fearful that he would not have enough. His fear kept him from taking many risks in life. He worked for the Pacific Telephone Company for 45 years beginning as a cable splicer's helper and working his way up to middle management without a college degree. He died while he was still working at age 64, just a year older than I am now.

So I have been wondering: how would my Dad and people like my dad respond to the economic uncertainty of the last few weeks? As a man of strong principles, what would he think about executives who risked other people's money while insuring that their futures were secure even if that risk proved to be a failure? As a man whose motto was to take care of yourself and expect others to do the same, how would he feel about the rescue of financial institutions? As a man who did not have a strong sense of the transcendent, where would he find hope in the midst of uncertainty?

The words of Jesus from our scripture this morning are words to people like my father. They are words to people who are anxious over temporary things; words to people who worry about if they will have enough; if their money will last them to the end of their lives.

Eugene Peterson translates these verses like this: *"What I'm trying to do here is to get you to relax, not to be so preoccupied with getting rich so that you can respond to God's giving. People who don't know God and the way he works fuss over these things, but you know both God and how he works."*

Steep yourself in God-reality, God-initiative, God-provisions. You'll find all your everyday human concerns will be met. Don't be afraid of missing out. You're my dearest

friends! The Father wants to give you the very kingdom itself.

Be generous. Give to the poor. Get yourselves a bank that can't go bankrupt, a bank in heaven far from bank robbers, safe from embezzlers, a bank you can bank on. It's obvious, isn't it? The place where your treasure is, is the place you will most want to be, and end up being."

Last week we talked about those who have too much. This week there is advice for those who fear they do not or will not have enough: 1) Consider the evidence; 2) Focus on God's Priorities; 3) Practice Generosity.

Consider the evidence

Three times in this teaching Jesus invites his followers to consider the evidence when they are dealing with their anxiety about whether or not they will have enough. Jesus speaks to their anxiety and tells them to look around them. Consider the testimony of nature. God takes care of the birds and the flowers. If God takes care of them, will God not also take care of you? Look at the birds. Look at the lilies.

The birds he referred to were the ravens who were the scavengers of the desert plain. They depended on others for their food. They ate the scraps of what others threw away or they scavenged the fields for the remnants of the harvest. Yet they never went hungry. Jesus asks the question: "If God feeds them, do you not think that human beings are at least as important as the birds."

The lilies he referred to were scarlet anemones—bright red day lilies which bloomed one day and died. They are beautiful for a day, and their beauty rivals anything one might find in a king's court. If God cares for the birds of the air and the plants of the earth, will he not care for human beings who are the apex of God's creation?

Max Lucado puts it much more personally: *There are many reasons God loves (saves) you: to bring glory to himself, to appease his justice, to demonstrate his sovereignty. But one of the sweetest reasons God loved (saved) you is because he is fond of you. He likes having you around. He thinks you are the best thing to come down the pike in quite a while. If God had a refrigerator, your picture would be on it. If he had a wallet, your photo would be in it. He sends you flowers every spring and a sunrise every morning. Whenever you want to talk, he'll listen. He can live anywhere in the universe, and he chose your heart. And the Christmas gift he sent you in Bethlehem? Face it, friend. He's crazy about you!* [Source: Max Lucado, *A Gentle Thunder* (Word, 1995)]

Focus on God's Priorities

The second piece of advice Jesus gives to people like my father is to focus on God's priorities. We can make ourselves sick over what we've lost or what we don't have. Materialism feeds the myth that we are what we have. The Gospel tells us that these are the wrong priorities. It is not what we have that defines us. It is who God is that defines us. When we focus on God's priorities, everything else takes its proper place.

A few years ago John Meacham, the editor of Newsweek magazine, interviewed Billy Graham. He was amazed by Dr. Graham's attitude in spite of deteriorating health, and he wrote, "He seems congenitally incapable of surrendering completely to the weakness of the body."

Anne Graham-Lotz, recounted a conversation with her father on the subject of aging. "All my life, I've been taught how to die," Billy told her, "but no one ever taught me how to grow old." Lotz also noted that she had learned an important lesson about

aging after observing her father: "When you get older, secondary things, like politics, begin to fall away, and the primary things become primary again. And for Daddy, the primary thing is, as Jesus said, to try to love God totally and to love our neighbor as ourselves." [Source: Jon Meacham, "Pilgrim's Progress," Newsweek (8-14-06), p. 38]

The words of Jesus challenge us to focus on the right priorities. In a world which intends to seduce us to follow its own priorities, this is difficult to do. We are drawn to the priorities which are the loudest at the moment. Material success and political power vie for our attention in this election cycle, but you know what? I have never met anyone on their deathbed who said they wished they had made more money or voted for the right candidate in a certain election. I have heard people wish they had developed stronger relationships with those they loved or spent their time in more meaningful activity.

Jesus says that when we focus on God's priorities, all of our needs will be taken care of. We will be able to distinguish between what we want and what we need, and we will be satisfied with what we need.

Practice Generosity

The final piece of advice Jesus gives to a man like my father is to practice generosity. Give out of a sense of gratitude to God for the gift of grace you have received from God, "*For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.*"

As you know, we are back in the baby business with the adoption of our second grandchild, Nya. So my wife is on the lookout for things that will help our daughters raise both our granddaughters to be happy, healthy children. This week she found an article on the internet entitled *Seven Secrets to Raising a Happy Child*.

It turns out that the seventh secret to happy children link feelings of gratitude to emotional well-being. Research at the University of California, Davis, and elsewhere has shown that people who keep daily or weekly gratitude journals feel more optimistic, make more progress toward goals, and feel better about their lives overall. For a child, keeping a journal may be unrealistic. But one way to foster gratitude in children is to ask that each member of the family take time daily -- before or during a meal, for example -- to name aloud something he or she is thankful for, Carter suggests. The important thing is to make it a regular ritual. "This is one habit that will foster all kinds of positive emotions," she assures, "and it really can lead to lasting happiness." [Source: Seven Secrets to Raising a Happy Child by Marguerite Lamb, *American Baby magazine*, May 2008 issue).

Our Annual Giving Campaign is one of the tangible ways we measure of our gratitude to God. Giving is a spiritual matter because it forces us to decide what belongs to us and what belongs to God. Those of us who have learned the blessing of the tithe know that it is a discipline which reminds us that everything we have belongs to God and we show our gratitude by giving back 10% of what we have out of gratitude for everything that is given to us.

Therefore, our Annual Giving Campaign is like the annual physical you go to the doctor for every year. It is like a spiritual cardiogram; a "heart check." It forces us to see how grateful we really are to God for all that we have received from God. Jesus said, "*Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.*" If we say we are grateful, but we withhold from God what God has given to us, then God may legitimately ask, "*Just how grateful are you?*" The choice is in your hands. It is not just about the future of our

ministry. It is about the condition of your heart. *“Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.*