

First Presbyterian Church
Cheyenne, Wyoming
August 1, 2010
Rev. Roger Rapp
Worship Theme: "What Money Can't Buy"
Luke 12: 13-21

One of the surprises that came to me after my first year of retirement after 40 years of ministry in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America was a 9% reduction in my pension for 2010, to be continued in 2011, and 2012. For those who have investments, a loss in value of your portfolio is nothing new. But retirement income is not supposed to be the same as investment income. Retirement income is designed to be stable. Like Social Security, it may not increase, but it is not supposed to decrease. The result of reckless behavior by some in the financial world in fact trickles down to us regular, ordinary people. This is the world we now live in, and it is disturbing and frustrating.

In our reading from Ecclesiastes, there is the cynical reminder that "all the deeds that are done under the sun...is vanity and a chasing after wind." (Chapter 1, verse 14). In this age of "too big to fail" banks and a society obsessed with the accumulation of things, we are all being constantly reminded that the world has changed, and we are not necessarily the masters of our own fate, and that what we may have hoped for will not come to pass. At least not financially.

But could it be that in today's readings, there is a message that we need to hear? Could it be that we have been placing too much emphasis on getting more and more as if that is what life is about? Sir Winston Churchill once said that "we make a living by what we get, but we make a life by what we give." In our reading from Colossians we read in vs. 5 that we are to "put to death that which is earthly...impurity, evil desires, and greed (which is idolatry)." We are instead urged to live a life that is shaped by a new perspective, where we are, in Christ, new creatures that have been given a new way of living...life that is received as gift, and returned during our lifetimes as gift. Our motivation then is not based on our selfish desires, but rather our motivation is based on the love of God that has been poured out for us on the cross. Our lives, brief as they are, can have fulfillment, not in things that we accumulate, but can be lived with joy and contentment by rejoicing in what we have, and by sharing part of our blessings with others.

Many years ago, on my internship year in California, I had the opportunity to visit the home of a family that lived on the 17 mile drive near the coastal city of Monterrey. The home was right down the road from the famous Pebble Beach golf course. As you can imagine, it was the kind of home that celebrities live in. Pool, servants, view of the ocean. The children were grown and gone. A woman in her late fifties lived there. Her husband was gone about 80% of the time, travelling the world and making money. The woman was miserable, surrounded by wealth. Ironically, instead of envying this woman, I felt sad for her.

At the same time, in subsequent years, I have observed people with considerable wealth who are happy and content. Almost always they are generous and giving of their resources. They realize that wealth by itself does not bring joy, but how we share the gifts that we have accumulated is what gives life deeper meaning and value.

Looking at the Gospel reading that is familiar to many of us, Jesus tells the story of a very wealthy man whose crops had such a good year he couldn't even store the harvest. So he built more barns and set himself up for many years of luxury so he could "relax, drink, and be merry." But of course, there was one variable he hadn't figured into the equation...God came to him and reminded him that when he died he couldn't take it with him. Jesus then says, "That's the way it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich in the ways of God."

Did you ever see a truckload of stuff following a casket to the grave?

The main point in the story Jesus tells is not that the rich man was evil because his land was productive. It was not because he planned larger barns for his crops. Rather, he is judged for his unwillingness to share his wealth, for his planning to become lazy and gluttonous, but most of all he was judged for placing his reliance on things...treasures on this earth...rather than on God.

Martin Luther, the great Reformer, put it this way, "I have held many things in my hands and have lost them all; but whatever I have placed in God's hands...that, I still possess."

There are some things that money can't buy. As grandparents, we see this in the eyes of our grandchildren. How do you put a price on a precious new life?

Last week we took our older grandson, Iain, to the Paul Smith Children's Village. Iain is almost 6, and is always asking questions. When we entered the village, he asked, "Who is Paul Smith?"

Mary gently told him that Paul Smith was a man who did not have any children of his own but when he died he left money that helped provide this special place. In the garden I noticed other gifts at different stations with more names on them. Some of the names were familiar. How wonderful it was to see these gift, already paid for, thus, they are there and paid for. As I pondered today's Gospel text, I imagined a year into the future....let's say about the year 2045. I imagined Iain returning to the Paul Smith Children's Village with his daughter, who is about 6 years old. She asks, "Daddy, who is Paul Smith?" And Iain answers, "Many years ago, when I was about your age, your grandmother Mary told me about Paul Smith, who did not have any children of his own, but when he died he left money that helped provide this special place. Fast forward now to the year 2080. A young mother enters the Paul Smith Children's village, and her son asks "Who is Paul Smith?" And his mother says, "Many years ago, your great grandmother Mary came here with your grandfather Iain...."

When we receive the elements of communion today, we cannot buy what God offers to us. We can only receive, and pass on the gifts of love, peace, reconciliation, and generosity to others, as we are willing, and as we are able. There still exists treasures on earth that Money Can't Buy.

In my first congregation, Mary gave me a plaque with a picture of St. Francis on one side and his famous simple prayer on the other. That was in 1968. I did not buy it. It was gift. I have had it on my desk ever since. I close by reading this prayer to you from the plaque. Let us pray...

Lord, make me an instrument of your peace,
Where there is hatred..Let me sow love.
Where there is injury...pardon.
Where there is doubt...faith.

Where there is despair...hope.

Where there is darkness....light.

Where there is sadness....joy.

O Divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek

To be consoled...as to console.

To be understood...as to understand.

To be loved....as to love.

For

It is in giving....that we receive.

It is in pardoning, that, we are pardoned.

It is in dying...that we are born to eternal life.

Yes, there are treasures the Money Can't Buy. Come to the Lord's table and receive them.

Amen...