

**Rev. Dr. David Holyan**  
**“Serve God Not Wealth”**  
**First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood**  
**Sunday, September 22, 2019**

**I Timothy 2:1-7**

*First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings should be made for everyone, for kings and all who are in high positions, so that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and dignity. This is right and is acceptable in the sight of God our Saviour, who desires everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. For there is one God;*

*there is also one mediator between God and humankind,  
Christ Jesus, himself human,*

*who gave himself a ransom for all*

*—this was attested at the right time. For this I was appointed a herald and an apostle (I am telling the truth, I am not lying), a teacher of the Gentiles in faith and truth.*

**Luke 16:1-13**

*Then Jesus said to the disciples, “There was a rich man who had a manager, and charges were brought to him that this man was squandering his property. So he summoned him and said to him, “What is this that I hear about you? Give me an account of your management, because you cannot be my manager any longer.” Then the manager said to himself, “What will I do, now that my master is taking the position away from me? I am not strong enough to dig, and I am ashamed to beg. I have decided what to do so that, when I am dismissed as manager, people may welcome me into their homes.” So, summoning his master’s debtors one by one, he asked the first, “How much do you owe my master?” He answered, “A hundred jugs of olive oil.” He said to him, “Take your bill, sit down quickly, and make it fifty.” Then he asked another, “And how much do you owe?” He replied, “A hundred containers of wheat.” He said to him, “Take your bill and make it eighty.” And his master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly; for the children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light. And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth so that when it is gone, they may welcome you into the eternal homes.*

*‘Whoever is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much; and whoever is dishonest in a very little is dishonest also in much. If then you have not been faithful with the dishonest wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches? And if you have not been faithful with what belongs to another, who will give you what is your own? No slave can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth.’*

Let us pray. Gracious and loving God. We open our hearts, our minds, our imaginations, and our faith to you and to the power and mystery of your spirit at work within us, among us, and through us. I pray that you would take whatever it is within us that has our attention. I pray that you would take the words from scripture that we have heard the words and song and in prayer that we offer, the words that you relayed upon my heart this morning to share. By the mystery and power of your spirit, touch, bless and transform these words into the living word of Christ, your word alive within each of us. And let that word teach and guide, provide comfort and strength, challenge and direct us. Let that word be your word to us. In the name of Christ our Lord. Amen.

So this weekend, I have found myself a bachelor because my wife is visiting her parents in Nampa, Idaho. She's decided to go visit them and see them in the home that they moved into after leaving the home that my wife was raised in for a significant part of her life in Washington state. In spite of the fact that they're coming in two weeks for our son's wedding, she's there because she wanted to go and be with them and me and Ella, our beloved little dog, have the house to ourselves. I have found myself with a lot of time on my hands and doing different things. And so I was on the computer later in the day that I took Jani to the airport, and I was looking at articles about some things that are happening in the world of football. I've kind of kept up with those things, even this morning checking in to see what's going on because--if you're a New England Patriots fan, God bless you, but having grown up in Seattle, I can tell you that in my list of top favorite professional teams, at the bottom is the New England Patriots.

But they have a great track history and a reputation. They're winners. They've won Superbowl after Superbowl. They've beat the Sea-Hawks in the Superbowl. They do what they do really well. One of the things that they do is rehabilitate professional athletes who have fallen off of the wagon of good behavior, let's say. And one of those athletes is a man named Antonio Brown, also known as A.B. Now A.B. is a wide receiver, arguably one of the best in the national football league or was one of the best in the National Football League. He played for the Pittsburgh Steelers for many years until he held out and decided he did not want to be in Pittsburgh anymore. and so they sent him to the Oakland Raiders. So he went all the way across the country. And he didn't show up for their training camp and he wouldn't take their guaranteed \$27 million dollars. So they cut him, and the day they did that, the New England Patriots signed him and brought him to Boston and they were going to begin their rehabilitation project. Unfortunately about the time he arrived, new stories of his behavior started to come out more and more public, and let's just say he does not know how to treat ladies well. That's an understatement on the accusations that have been made against him. And so numerous and voluminous and believable were these stories that the Patriots, the last best hope for folks who need rehabilitation in this way, decided to get rid of him. How you end up looking at these things is beyond me, but it was a picture of him getting on a plane in Boston after leaving the news that he's done with the patriots. So he's getting on a plane, and then there's a picture of him getting off of-- by the way, it's his plane, his private jet in Miami where he lives. And the story or the part that I read was about the fact that when he got on the plane, he was dressed all in Nike apparel, the sporting company with the Swoosh. They poured rubber in a waffle iron and made a tennis shoe out of it, and the rest is history. Those folks, they cut him, and so when he showed up in Miami, there was no Swoosh anywhere, and the article was about how not only did New England cut him, but Nike cut him as well, and they paid him millions and millions and millions of dollars just to wear their clothing, and the reason they did that is because people paid attention to the star athlete, and they wanted to be like him. They wanted to be great football players, and so they bought that clothing.

They wanted to build an identity as someone who's successful, who can go out and "just do it" as the advertisement says. And so they bought those clothes, and they aspired to be great and now because of his behavior, A.B.'s been dumbed by the patriots and by Nike, and it made me start to think about the question of identity. Who are we, and what are we trying to build? And I had this question as something happened that is still one of the most precious things that's ever happened to me in ministry. I had a package this week on my desk. It was a little manila envelope package. I opened it up to find a pocket knife. Somebody in the congregation gifted me a pocket knife, and not only a pocket knife but a used pocket knife. Now, when I opened it up and started getting the letter out and the knife falls on the desk, it's like, "What are you--?" I was a little nervous to be honest when I read this letter, this beautiful letter that talked about growing up in Southern Mississippi in the '50s and how this person's grandfather took him by hand to the local store, the drug store, and told him to get a pocket knife not too big because he needed to be able to carry it around. And the tradition in that culture growing up was that you would have a pocket knife for a couple of years, you would use it regularly, and then you would hand it on to a friend. And I cannot tell you how touched I was by that gift, and that story. It took my breath away. It was so neat, partly because I had been wondering as a fisherman should I get a pocket knife for not. I never resolved that question. But this gift was about identity. It means something about who you are when you have a pocket knife and you use it and you gift it to someone. It means you're a good person.

And so, I was feelingg these things, intentions, in me. The AB story about his unraveling over behavior that's reprehensible and this amazing gift. And I'm like, "Okay." So what do I do? I, coming back from being away for a while because of medical reasons, decide to redo my office yet again. I open a drawer that I'm convinced I haven't opened in 11 years. I open it and I find these two blue boxes that say, "Crane and Co." on them. And I pull the lid off and I find some stationery that is unbelievable. The paper is made by angels. And the heading of it in the biggest, boldest lettering that you can find says, "The Reverend Doctor David A. Holyan, Pastor, First Presbyterian Church." and the address. So I take that out and I'm like, "I'm going to use this really cool stationery to write a thank you note and I'm going to use the \$350 Mount Blanc pen that my father-in-law gave me to write it." And so I wrote-- "Thank you so much for this gift," or something like that. It meant so much to me that I brought out the fancy stationery and the \$350 pen.

And then in the moment of quiet, as I was praying about and thinking about the AB situation, and thinking about Nike, thinking about the amazing beauty of someone thinking about me enough to gift me like that, and then thinking about how much of a donkey's trailing anatomy I am to say I am using the fancy stationery and to name how expensive the pen was to write the thank you note. I'm sitting there going, "What is this all about?" This idea of identity and needing fancy stationery 11 or 12 years ago? So I realized that when I got here I didn't feel very much like the pastor. At 42 I was younger than most of the congregants' children. There were questions about this, that, and-- true, right? [laughter] I mean I'm surprised-- no, I won't go there. And so my needing to create an identity meant I ordered Crane's Stationery with the coolest paper with my name and my place and blah, blah, blah. And I'm thankful that I haven't used it for years. I felt good about using it when I wrote this thank you note, but as

I've reflected on it, I'm like, "Oh man, what is it all about?" And this is our struggle. What is our identity? Is it that we're a people who are blessed and have good things while inside feeling inadequate or having people question us, or is it just that we're genuinely good people and we do what's right?

So as I'm holding all of this and trying to make sense of it, I have a vision that lasted that long, and I'm going to share it with you. It was of someone walking up a dirt path towards the crest of a hill, and the person obviously had been walking a long time. They looked tired, and the clothes they had on were a little bit too big, and they were baggy and wrinkly and they looked dirty. And as the person was walking towards the crest of the hill, there were fingers coming out of the ground trying to grab that person by their clothes and pull them back down the hill or down the path. And as I thought about that, it's like, "Oh my gosh, that's the tension we live in. We want to walk and be like what Christ desires for us, and yet the powers and the principalities, our ego, our defenses, our worries, our concerns, our infirmities, they are trying to hold us back and keep us in place." And as I played with this image, what I saw was that this person walked himself out of those clothes and just kept walking towards the setting sun, towards what Timothy says, "That we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and dignity."

And so I lay before you the question about money or God and ask, "What is your identity? Which matters more? Which one is holding you back and which one is setting you free?" Because I realize that as we walk through this life, there is always a tension between God's promise and the power of the ego and the whatever it is that's trying to make us be more than we really are. And when Jesus is talking to these Pharisees and His disciples about God and wealth, what He's saying to them is, "Do not lose the dignity that you are created to be." And I found a story that captures that sense of dignity so beautifully.

Every year, there's a presentation award show on ESPN called the ESPY awards, and for several years, they've given out what they call the Jimmy V Perseverance Award, named after Jim Valvano, who was a basketball coach who had cancer passed away. Some of the recipients of this award have been football players who have been paralyzed but then able to stand with medical aids and devices, they've been coaches who've had cancer like Jimmy V and they've kept coaching, etc., etc. This year, they gave a Perseverance Award to a high school JV football coach, not famous, not rich, not endorsed by anybody, a man by the name of Bob Mendez who was born with a rare disorder called tetra-amelia syndrome. That's a fancy way of saying he has no arms and no legs. And as I read about this man and then watched a news story about him on the computer, it shows him in this specialized wheelchair zooming around a football field with a whistle in his mouth, yelling instructions to the kids, and it's just an amazing thing to see happen. He's the coach at Prospect High School in Saratoga, California, and on the very back of his wheelchair is a phrase that's now made into a hashtag because of Twitter, but it says, "Who says I can't?"

Who says I can't? Does God say you can't? No. Only you can say that you can't. Only you can say that you can't have the dignity that God created you to have. Only you can get in your way. Those fingers that are clawing for our attention and our identity, those worries, those fears, those infirmities, those struggles, nothing can stop you if you keep on walking. So brothers and sisters, walk into the dignity that is yours through Christ our Lord. Don't stop. Amen.