

Rev. Dr. David Holyan
“The Upside Down of Faith”
First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood
Sunday, September 29, 2019

I Timothy 6:6-19

Of course, there is great gain in godliness combined with contentment; for we brought nothing into the world, so that we can take nothing out of it; but if we have food and clothing, we will be content with these. But 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. 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.

But as for you, man of God, shun all this; pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance, gentleness. Fight the good fight of the faith; take hold of the eternal life, to which you were called and for which you made the good confession in the presence of many witnesses. In the presence of God, who gives life to all things, and of Christ Jesus, who in his testimony before Pontius Pilate made the good confession, I charge you to keep the commandment without spot or blame until the manifestation of our Lord Jesus Christ, which he will bring about at the right time—he who is the blessed and only Sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords. It is he alone who has immortality and dwells in unapproachable light, whom no one has ever seen or can see; to him be honour and eternal dominion. Amen.

As for those who in the present age are rich, command them not to be haughty, or to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but rather on God who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. They are to do good, to be rich in good works, generous, and ready to share, thus storing up for themselves the treasure of a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of the life that really is life.

Luke 16:19-31

There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. And at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, who longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man's table; even the dogs would come and lick his sores. The poor man died and was carried away by the angels to be with Abraham. The rich man also died and was buried. In Hades, where he was being tormented, he looked up and saw Abraham far away with Lazarus by his side. He called out, "Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am in agony in these flames." But Abraham said, "Child, remember that during your lifetime you received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner evil things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in agony. Besides all this, between you and us a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who might want to pass from here to you cannot do so, and no one can cross from there to us." He said, "Then, father, I beg you to send him to my father's house—for I have five brothers—that he may warn them, so that they will not also come into this place of torment." Abraham replied, "They have Moses and the prophets; they should listen to them." He said, "No, father Abraham; but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent." He said to him, "If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead."

Let us pray. Gracious and loving God, open our hearts, our minds, our imaginations, and our faith to you and to the power of your holy spirit. I pray that you would take that within us, which has our attention. The words that we offer in song and in prayer, the words that we've heard from Scripture, and the words that you've laid upon my heart this morning to share. Touch, bless, and transform all of these things into the word of Christ. And let that word guide us and feed us, comfort us, and challenge us. Let it grow inside of us so that we might bear fruit - fruit of goodness and kindness, care, compassion, mercy, and grace - and that we might share that with everyone around us and our neighbors who are far away. I ask this in Christ's name. Amen.

One of the first things on Monday morning that Paula Bujewski, the office manager upstairs, does, is take an audio clip of this service. She cuts out all of the stuff that happens just before the reading of the Gospel and then she stops at the end of the sermon and sends it to a place called Transcribe Me where we have an account set up. And for X number of dollars, they'll take that audio clip and they'll turn it into a Word document. So she'll send that in about 10 o'clock usually on a Monday morning, and

sometimes within the hour, we'll get back a Word document of every word that I say. When Karen preaches, and really anyone who preaches, the same process occurs.

Well, this week, on Tuesday, I came in to work after working at home in the morning and Paula was upstairs talking to the evening custodian, Colleen. So I just stopped and began to chat with them about this, that, and the other. And at one point, fairly early in the conversation, Paula says to me, "Hey, can I tell you something?" Now, I don't know about you, but when someone says, "Hey, can I tell you something?" I'm thinking of spinach between the teeth or other bad things that you don't want, like, "Look in the mirror, dude. You would've caught it," kind of stuff. And I looked at her and she could tell by the look on my face like, "Oh, I probably shouldn't say anything," and I'm like, "No. Come on. What is it?" And she said, "Well, I edit a lot of your sermons when they come back from the transcriptionist. And every now and then, I have to go through it and take out the phrase "sort of" because you use that phrase a lot. I think it's part of your verbal tick. You just say it. You don't even know it. You don't think about it." She keeps talking. I immediately start laughing. And she caught herself, and she looks at me, she's like, "What are you laughing about?" And I said, "Oh, if you only knew." My cousin, when I was probably 10 or 12 years old, could draw anything. He was amazing. He created this little tiny comic book about his dad, my uncle, and my dad. And the comic was titled, I Mean Man verses And Stuff So Man. Because apparently as a holy male there's a rich tradition of having these phrases, and my uncle was a classic. He couldn't say five words without saying: I mean, I mean, I mean. And so my cousin picked up on this thing and he created a comic book. I was laughing because I thought now I'm "sort of a man". But I don't yet have a comic. Don't try to patent that name. I'm all ready working on it. The next big superhero sort of a man. I looked at Colleen, the evening custodian, and I said somewhat sarcastically, "Oh, isn't it great to come into work and get preaching advice?" And then I went to my office. I don't think my bottom had hit the chair before Paula was at the door saying, "Hey, I want to tell you some more--" I'm like, "Paula., you don't need to do that. I understand. If I had written out every word of every sermon, I would catch that, but I don't. I just stand up with some notes in front of me and I just opened my mouth and stuff flies out." And she's like, "But no, I want to tell you something. Because it's not that you use the word sort of," she said, "You also do something that's amazing to me." And I thought, "Okay, she's just trying to even it out," but she kept going. She said at some point, there was a sermon where I mentioned a rock, and that I had stopped and noticed the rock. I had talked about it. About the shadow or the light or some aspect of it. But when I looked at the rock, there was meaning and significance and the presence of the Holy. And she told me that she doesn't have that ability. She doesn't see a rock and stop and kind of wonder, "What's God doing now?" She sees a rock, and steps over it because she's busy and tries to get to the next thing. And then we chatted about whether it was the training that we have or temperament. How does someone get to that point, when you can sort of stop--? There it is, I caught it...that was for you, Paula.

How we get to that point where we stop and notice the things that are on the edges and sometimes those things are obvious, and this passage from the Gospel of Luke is one of those. The thing on the edge that's not noticed by the rich man and the purple robes and fine linens who eats well, is that his neighbor is suffering right at the edge of his property. The suffering man eats what he can, rummaging around through the garbage. He's cared for by the neighborhood dogs. And day and night and time and again the rich man overlooks that person in need. So sometimes it's not rocks that have God's holy presence that we need to pay attention to. Sometimes it's our neighbors who are right in front of us. The needs are obvious. When the note comes out that Kik Care is out of food, we all respond immediately. But this passage is a warning to all of us, a story that is trying to get us to pay attention to our love of money and the needs of neighbors and how difficult it is for us to release our grip on our money in order to care for our neighbors and so this story represents a cosmic battle between heaven and hell. It's a wake-up call. Pay attention to the edges. Pay attention to where God's at work in your life. Pay attention to what you're doing and who's in front of you.

So this week I've been thinking about edge experiences or what, on Stranger Things, they call the upside-down. Where something that's normal when you look at it closely you realize that there's more going on there than meets the eye and we're about to have one of those experiences with communion. An edge experience where we will take an amazingly small piece of bread dipped in a cup of juice, and by putting that in our mouth we will be participating in the holy divine banquet between God and the saints throughout all of time and forevermore. A little piece of bread and a couple drops of juice. This is my body broken for you. Take and eat. This is my blood shed for you for the forgiveness of your sin. Take and drink. In these small elements, in this sacrament of ours, we have, if we're paying attention, the opportunity to see, feel and trust that God is at work in our own lives.

Throughout this passage, Abraham tells the rich man to pay attention to Moses and the prophets. That everything that his brothers need to know about being good is in Moses and the prophets and so what I did is I combined the idea of knowing Moses and the prophets with edge experience and I came up with this: what happens if we look at the edges of what Moses says

in the Old Testament and what Isaiah says in the Old Testament? Just the edges. So I went to the end of Deuteronomy or at least the end of where Moses is speaking and teaching to the people. Just before he calls Joshua up to lead them over the River Jordan into the promised land, Moses has this last thing that comes out of his mouth. "See. I have set before you today life and prosperity. Death and adversity. If you obey the commandments of the Lord your God that I am commanding you today by loving the Lord your God, walking in his ways, observing his commandments, decrees and ordinances then you shall live and become numerous and the Lord your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to possess. But if your heart turns away and you do not hear but are led astray to bow down to other gods and serve them, I declare to you today that you shall perish. You shall not live long in the land that you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess. I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death. Blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live loving the Lord your God, obey, fast to God for that means life to you and length of days so that you may live in the land that the Lord swore to give to your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac and to Jacob." The last words of Moses before the people crossed the river. And then I went to Isaiah to the beginning. I already had an ending so I wondered what's happening at the beginning of the prophet. The major prophet of the faith and here are these words in the first chapter: "When you stretch out your hands" --this is God speaking, "When you stretch out your hands I will hide my eyes from you even though you make many prayers. I will not listen. Your hands are full of blood. Wash yourselves. Make yourselves clean. Remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes. Cease to do evil. Learn to do good. Seek justice. Rescue the oppressed. Defend the orphan. Plead for the widow." Sounds a lot like the sermon on the mount from Jesus' lips to the people who are following him. The vision of Isaiah is God calling him to bring about these things. To do good. To seek justice. To rescue the oppressed. To defend the orphan. To plead for the widow. As Christians in America, our temptation is to be self-centered and concerned only about our salvation.

As Presbyterians, my hope is, and our tradition has been, that we understand that through our generous giving we become the mission and ministry of Christ. Remember this passage from Luke is a teaching moment of utmost importance. Life or death. Riches or service. My hope and my prayers that each of us will think about these words and let them stew within us as we come to the table and experience again, just a piece of God's goodness. That edge experience of something bigger and more powerful, and my prayer is also that that experience slows us down as we hurry through life so that we might see those in need in front of us and respond with grace. Amen.