

“REQUIRED OR INSPIRED?”

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Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Readings from Scripture: 1 Timothy 6:6-12, 17-19 and Luke 16:19-31

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.

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.

1 Timothy 6:6-12, 17-19

“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.’”

Luke 16:19-31

Will you pray with me? Holy God, as we worship you this day and hear your Word and gather in worship, may we be inspired and encouraged, challenged and made aware in new ways. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.

I have to agree with David, the passages for stewardship time are not the easiest ones to approach. So I am going to begin this morning by talking a little bit about a book that we are discussing at First Pres called To Heal a Fractured World by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks. In the book he talks about ethics and responsibility in today's world and the roles of justice and mercy. But one of the ways that he expresses his point is through real-life stories, because he feels that the stories of life convey both wisdom and truths that we can learn from. I thought about the many ways in which we use stories to share wisdom in our own culture, through myths and folk tales, through books and movies and musicals. The musical "Hamilton" has been a great success. It brings forth the history not only of our country in its earliest years but also the role of immigrants through hip-hop music. The movie, "Sully", is about the pilot on the Miracle on the Hudson and he touches on our desire to have heroes, not of superhuman strength, but those who have a deep seated goodness with a passion to do what is right and to care for those that are in his care and keep them safe. During this last month we have heard a lot of stories connected to the events of 9/11. They were stories of courage and kindness and hope offered in the midst of a very difficult time.

But still I was surprised to hear on NPR not long ago about, of all things, a musical on 9/11. I thought it was really odd that there would be a musical about 9/11, but as I listened to the story, I was really moved by its message. The musical is called, "Come from Away". It's a story of what happened when 38 planes bound for airports in the U.S. were grounded on 9/11, and in this particular play, it is about the town of Gander, Newfoundland in Canada. *Come from away* is a term that the people on the island use to talk about those who come to see them from off the island. They responded to the people who came. On those planes were over 6,000 passengers and crew and they sat on the tarmac for hours. There was a little bit of food which was shared and I understand all the liquid refreshments were dispersed as they sat on the tarmac waiting. You can imagine how unsettling it was for those sitting on the planes. At first they, and none of us, knew what was going on and they had no idea where they were. The chorus from the song "Come from Away" says, "You are here on the edge of the world where the river meets the sea, here on the edge of the Atlantic, on an island in between." Gander is a small town—it's 11,000 people. It has a few hotels, five stop lights, one high school and a strip of chain stores.¹ It's not a place that has a great amount of access to emergency supplies, as one might find in a large city. But the people there really sprang into action.

The following morning when the passengers and crew were finally allowed to disembark, they found that the Ganderites had been up all night and they had prepared tables of food spread out like the messianic banquet. They truly welcomed them and nourished them. But not only for that day. For the next five days the people of the planes could not leave. So they were welcomed, and fed and received medications. They showered and washed their clothes and they passed the time on that island until they could go home. The musical is the story about the compassion and generosity of those who gave things to strangers and turned them into friends. We know that, because the Canadian couple that wrote the play came to New York and interviewed hundreds of people who wanted to share the story of what had happened that day. Some traveled from towns several hours away just to tell how helpful it was to them in such a terrifying time. Even our ambassador to Canada said he went there on the 10th anniversary of 9/11 because there was no other place he wanted to be. So it is a story that lives on because of generosity and gratitude. And, indeed, the passengers and crew really responded, because after they left the town, when they finally

were allowed to go, the townspeople found \$60,000 in their suggestion box that was offered to provide scholarships for their young ones on the island.²

I think the passages this morning are on the same theme. They are about giving and generosity. They reflect the understandings of the challenge and the role of wealth, and the challenge of sharing wealth. Now the Gospel reading is one of Jesus' typical styles of story, a parable. We heard about the rich man who ate sumptuously each day and ignored Lazarus. The way in which Jesus tells the story, you can almost imagine the rich man closing his eyes as he stepped over Lazarus to go into his home each day. So when the rich man dies, he is stunned to find that he is in Hades and the poor man is with Abraham. And it's in that moment that his understanding of life and faith are turned upside down. He might have been rich on earth but he is now suffering. And the one who had so little is being comforted. He wants to have Lazarus come to help him and bring him water, but Abraham tells him that he cannot do that. Then he asks Abraham to send Lazarus to warn his brothers, but Abraham says, "No, you learn about faith on earth and your brothers can too. It's up to them to listen and follow it for themselves."

Now, as David pointed out last week in the parable of the steward, Jesus isn't directing the story to the disciples but to the Pharisees. They are the rich ones, the establishment group who were always looking for ways to trip up Jesus. But what is interesting is that as selfish as the rich man seems to be, his view of wealth is one shared by the Pharisees. It reflects what is called a Deuteronomic view, the view, as it says in Deuteronomy, "if you obey God you will be blessed in war, in the marketplace, in the fields and at home."³ Godliness is in league with riches, prosperity is a clear sign of God's favor. But the reality is they could argue the case, the Pharisees, that they should not be helping this poor man because they would be interfering with God's punishment on them, that he was getting what he deserved. But Jesus challenges them to move from that perspective taught by some, to see the gifts of life and wealth and blessings in a new way. That those who are suffering are not suffering because they are being punished by God, but simply and unfortunately are hungry and homeless and hopeless. He wants them to realize that because they have wealth, they also have a responsibility to help those that don't have what they need. Because when they help others, they are serving God. He challenges them to keep from understanding that their wealth is a sign of God's favor. And he reminds them of the call of the prophet Isaiah who says those who have plenty are to "share bread with the hungry and to bring the homeless into their house." (Isaiah 58) He knows of the laws of their people, that they were to give certain amounts to God and to leave the gleanings, the leftovers, in the fields for those who are hungry.

I think the passage from 1 Timothy pushes this a little further. He talks about something more than what is required by the laws of the faith. He invites them to do so out of a genuine desire to help—not because they are required to but because they are inspired to. His point is that when we have enough to be content, the ability and the opportunity to give to others is in and of itself a gift. When we are willing to give away some of what we have, it is more than just giving, it is about sharing. For Jesus, praising God is not just about our words, our burnt offerings, it is most deeply expressed, through our generosity, to live out that call of Matthew, to feed those who are hungry and clothe those who are naked. Because when we do such things for others, we are doing them for God. But the writer of 1 Timothy also adds words of warning, that to have more than enough is both an opportunity and a temptation. He says that as for "those who are in the present age 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 enjoyment." They are to "do good, to be rich in good works, generous and ready to share."

So the writer understands the challenge of wealth and the responsibilities that come from having much. He is aware that the drive for money and possessions can take its toll. Not that money and wealth, themselves, are bad, rather that the obsession for it and of it can be destructive, because it can reshape how we view others in need, how we make decisions, to wander away from the call of faith. So his sense is that when faith is woven into our lives, financial well-being becomes more than not only taking care of my own needs or your own needs, but the opportunity to bring healing and hope to others. It is to be good stewards of what we have been entrusted with. If we have enough may we be content and thankful. If we have more than enough, may we be generous with it, to share with open hands ready to impart, and to give from an attitude that is ready to share. Generosity means giving freely. We don't give, then, out of a sense of ponderous duty or for what we expect in return, but to be generous in and of itself for the sake of offering hope and healing to others. For him to live "life that is truly life" is to live a life with meaning and purpose. And that comes in part by doing things that make a difference for others. Joy comes to those who give and in a world filled with anxiety, the opportunity to make a difference even in a small part of our world can bring us a deep sense of gratitude and meaning.

In closing, I would come back to the musical, "Come from Away". The people of Gander were willing to give, not because they were required to, but because they were inspired to for so many reasons. They responded, not with the bare necessities, but with great abundance and the desire to make a difference. They became and lived their best selves with generosity and hope and compassion. They had unexpected visitors, so they fed them. They were people without shelter, so they housed them. They were sick and they offered them medications. Not because they had to but because they felt called to. Through it, strangers became friends, relationships that still live on today.

So in this season of stewardship, we are reminded that we are the stewards of what we have been blessed with. We are called to be generous and to share, to make offerings for others in the name of God. To share what we have, not because we are required to, but because we are inspired to because we are so deeply thankful to God. This is what it means to be good stewards of what we have and who we are, and to serve the God we love with joy and thanksgiving. Amen.

- 1) 'Come From Away' Musical Tells Story Of Resilience After 9/11, All Things Considered, September 8, 2016 interview with Wade Goodwin as heard on NPR
- 2) 'Plane People' from 9/11 return to Newfoundland to Give Thanks, by Jim Lewis, September 11, 2011, as reported in the New York Times.
- 3) From the Interpretation Bible Study series on the Gospel of Luke, by Fred. B. Craddock, p. 192. and additional reflections through page 197.