

The past couple of weeks we have been talking Stewardship. And – sure – part of that conversation we've been having in worship (and through the things we've mailed to your homes and published in newsletters and on the website) – part of that conversation has been focused on the traditional churchy-sense of that word.

Yes – we have asked you to make a financial pledge to the church to support our ministry next year. Yes – we've asked for a specific amount: 5% more than you gave this year to help us keep up with inflation and our expanding ministry opportunities. Yes – we've asked for you to let the church know what your pledge is by today. And...yes – in another week or so if your pledge card keeps slipping down in that pile of mail on your kitchen counter or desk and you haven't turned it in – you will probably get a contact from the team of church members who are in charge of follow up.

But – at least in worship – our aim these past few weeks has been a bit bigger...maybe, deeper...than just finding obvious ways to ask you to share your generosity with the church. Our aim in worship is to help us think about and talk about our relationship to the material things in our lives. And about our relationship with the One who is the source of all things: those that are material and those that are eternal. The past two weeks we've framed that conversation through the Psalms. Today, we're going to read one more Psalm – the 112th.

The 112th Psalm features a lot of imagery around themes of darkness and light. To help accentuate that theme, before I read the Psalm, I am going to read a short portion from Matthew's gospel...some of Jesus's more famous words. Before I do that, please join me in prayer as we prepare to hear God's word. Let us pray:

But your Spirit, God, open us so that we might hear your good news...and, in hearing, that we might be changed...and, in changing, that we might be instruments of your grace who carry this good news into a weary world. We ask it in Jesus's name. Amen.

From Matthew 5:12-14

You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hidden. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.

+ + +

And, from Psalm 112

Praise the Lord!

Happy are those who fear the Lord,
who greatly delight in his commandments.

Their descendants will be mighty in the land;
the generation of the upright will be blessed.
Wealth and riches are in their houses,
and their righteousness endures forever.
They rise in the darkness as a light for the upright;
they are gracious, merciful, and righteous.
It is well with those who deal generously and lend,
who conduct their affairs with justice.
For the righteous will never be moved;
they will be remembered for ever.
They are not afraid of evil tidings;
their hearts are firm, secure in the Lord.
Their hearts are steady, they will not be afraid;
in the end they will look in triumph on their foes.
They have distributed freely, they have given to the poor;
their righteousness endures forever;
their horn is exalted in honor.

+ + +

You know what the Bible talks a lot about? Money.
You know what people who preach about the Bible in churches like ours don't usually talk a lot about?
Money.

You know why? Oh boy...

It's personal

It's complicated

It's makes people uncomfortable

It makes us feel guilty

People in the pews (not to mention preachers in the pulpit) have different experiences of money, and different amounts of money, and different attitudes toward money...which makes talking about it

AWKWARD

I could go on...

Most of the time, when the Bible talks about money, it is focused on not letting money have too much control of our lives...or, it is about lifting up the humanity and worth of the poor.

One of the things we shouldn't miss when it comes to money and the Bible is that Jesus himself lived a modest and meager life...as an itinerant preacher, living off the hospitality of others, as one without worldly means.

While it is true that there are *some* characters in the Biblical story **with means** who are cast in a positive light: Abraham, Jacob, David...they jump out in the Old Testament. Joseph of Aramethia jumps out in the New Testament. It is also the case that many other models of faith in Scripture are those **without many means**: the prophets, Mary and Joseph, many of the disciples, most of the people whom Jesus healed and taught during his ministry...

I would suspect that the way the Bible talks about money leaves many of us feeling a little uneasy and unsure.

And then there are those examples of preachers who **do talk** about money that make us really uncomfortable.

You know the ones.

The ones who drive Rolls Royces and who fly in private jets and who have hot tubs in their studies because they are so obviously #blessed.

The prosperity gospel preachers – whose message...which is off-the-mark...is that material blessings follow true faith. That if we but *really believe*, we will accumulate riches that we should celebrate and enjoy. And that **if you haven't** accumulated riches, well...then you must not believe enough.

Of course, Mother Theresa might have something to say about that. Or any faith-filled public school teacher you know. Or kids born into generational poverty who literally pray for their daily bread.

But, still, the power of that wrong-headed prosperity gospel narrative persists.

Do you see why it's sometimes hard to talk about money from the pulpit?

There's a lot going on in the background.

+ + +

I don't know if you noticed when I read today's Psalm – but, it treats money and possessions a bit differently than I am used to in other parts of the Bible.

Listen again from the first few verses:

*Happy are those who fear the Lord,
who greatly delight in his commandments.*

*Their descendants will be mighty in the land;
the generation of the upright will be blessed.
Wealth and riches are in their houses,
and their righteousness endures forever.*

If you're not careful, you might think this is a quote from the most famous of the Prosperity Gospel preachers, the Rev. Creflo Dollar.

In reality – it doesn't go that far.

But – what it does do is give us an example of Scripture acknowledging that...sometimes – not all the time, it certainly isn't a rule – but, sometimes, those who do good do well.

It's for this reason that I thought this might be a good Scripture for our church during this stewardship season.

Let me say something really carefully, but directly about our congregation – about our community: Compared to the rest of the world – maybe even the rest of our country, or our city – a lot of us who are members or participants at the First Presbyterian Church of Charlotte do pretty well.

Not all of us. Not by any means, all of us.

But a lot of us (including me) are doing well enough financially to live comfortably...to go on a vacation...to do some extra things for our kids or our nieces and nephews or our grandchildren...to be in a place to have our money work for us instead of feeling like we always have to work for our money.

I don't want to put too fine a point on this. I know – no matter your financial situation – there are always anxieties and nuances.

My point – generally – is that...while, in other parts of the Bible, relative wealth is perceived as ill-gotten gain...and while, in other parts of the Bible, people with means are warned to not let their possessions possess them instead...and while, in other parts of the Bible, it is clear that God has a special affinity for and commitment to being on the side of those without means...

my point is that in today's passage, the Bible affirms that **it is also true** that there are good and faithful people whose relative wealth and success are a natural outgrowth of their core commitments and their authentic selves.

That – in today's passage, we find that the Bible does give those with relative means a place to stand...a place to be...without feeling ashamed or guilty about what we have. And I don't think we say that from the pulpit a lot...maybe not enough.

The challenge, then, isn't to apologize for how we acquired those means.
The challenge is to know what we do with them.

+ + +

In Psalm 112 – being faithful is equivalent to a fear of the Lord.

*Happy are those who fear the Lord,
who greatly delight in his commandments.*

By fear, what the Psalmist means is respect.

A healthy respect. An admission that when it comes to God – and God's presence, and power, and promises, and truth – there is something so awesome and "other" and transcendent and beautiful that it demands our respect and attention and allegiance and devotion...even in the midst of all the other things in our world that compete for our attention.

The Episcopal priest, Scott Bader-Saye, writes that "only a fear of something greater can keep us from fearing something lesser."¹

I know we don't always get it right – I know that all of us are imperfect – I know we might not know all we think we should about what it means to love God and love our neighbor...about what it means to follow Jesus in a world that so often fails to reflect the vision that Jesus had for it.

But I also know that when you walk through those doors on a Sunday morning – or turn on your televisions or your computers to tune in – or step in the choir loft – or the pulpit...I know that part of what motivates us to do that is a fear...or a respect of the Lord. Part of what motivates us to do practice our faith is an acknowledgement that there is something about God's truth and God's promises that is bigger and more true than anything else.

"Only a fear...or a respect...of something greater can keep us from fearing...or respecting...something lesser."

I think that has something to do with why we are here.

¹ Attributed to Dr. Scott Bader-Saye and his book, *Following Jesus in a Culture of Fear*. Quoted by Jason Byassee (<https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/reviced-common-lectionary/fifth-sunday-after-epiphany/commentary-on-psalm-1121-9-10-5>)

Because we trust that, today’s Psalm encourages us to look for ways to shine the light of that truth in the darkness. To bear witness to a truth that is greater than any of the other things that seek to make us afraid.

That is what we are to do with the resources that we’ve earned and accumulated; with the material blessings that have followed as a result of our good work.

There’s no reason to apologize for having those resources.

But there’s ***so much opportunity through them*** to demonstrate what we know to be most true.

To rise in the darkness as a light...
To deal generously with others...
To conduct our affairs with justice...
To distribute – and give – freely...
To care for the poor...

The Psalm makes clear that **these** are ways that we bear witness to God’s light – and to God’s truth – and to God’s promise.

Jesus paraphrased the Psalm in his teaching: *You are the light of the world...so let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.*

+ + +

I’ve been a little preachy this morning. I’ve been doing a lot of telling but not a lot of showing. So let me close this sermon about how God calls us to use our stuff...our possessions...with a story.

It’s a story about a man in my last church in Louisiana who I will call Frank.

Frank was a farmer. A cotton farmer. Sometimes farms are passed down generation-to-generation and – as you can imagine – carry with them the legacy of both privilege and a troubled and sinful history. That was not true for Frank. He bought his farm in his middle age and worked extremely hard at it.

Frank was an earnest and steady guy. He was active in the church – always serving in ways that were helpful, but not showy. When stewardship season came around, his pledge was one of the first ones turned in – always based on a tithe...10% of what he had earned the year before. Since farming was so volatile, the amount differed year-to-year, but his commitment never wavered.

I remember when I first arrived at the church Frank asked me if I would pray for rain for the cotton crop. I thought he was joking. “No, preacher, I really want you to pray for rain.”

Even though things were sometimes tight for Frank, he delighted in being as generous as he could. One time I asked him why and he told me, “being able to give to things that help people gives my life a purpose.”

A couple of years after I was at the church, a company called Chesapeake Energy found an ocean of natural gas under Frank’s farm. It turns out that natural gas is more profitable than growing cotton. All of a sudden, Frank was able to help a lot more people: his church, his neighbors, the arts community, under-funded schools.

Around town and in the congregation there were lots of “it couldn’t have happened to a nicer guy” comments about Frank. And while that was true, Frank wasn’t having it. “Preacher,” Frank said, “I don’t know why this happened to me. But now I feel like I have even more of a responsibility to share what I’ve got.”

+ + +

I want you to know that I appreciate your generosity.

I appreciate the ways you support the ministry of this church, sure.

But I also appreciate the ways – even beyond this church that I see you being generous...with efforts to help those affected in Western North Carolina being a most recent example of that generosity.

I think – for people who have relative means – there’s always a question about what our stuff is for...is it for us? Or is it so that we have an opportunity to point to something beyond us?

There may be comfort in the former. But there is delight in the latter.

So may our collective light shine.

+ + +

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.