

A FOUNDATION FOR THE FUTURE

© Rev. Dr. Gary Blaine

University Congregational Church

September 26, 2010

Reading: I Timothy 6: 17-19 (ESV)

As for the rich in this present age, charge them not to be haughty, nor to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but on God, who richly provides us with everything to enjoy. They are to do good, to be rich in good works, to be generous and ready to share, thus storing up treasure for themselves as a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of that which is truly life.

We are entering the third Sunday of our annual stewardship campaign and we still have not sent you a pledge card. The idea is that we are hoping to remind everyone of the importance of our church's mission with your financial support, the commitment of your time, and the immeasurable value of your talent. I think of a church that was holding its stewardship banquet. At the meeting a very wealthy man rose to tell the rest of those present about his Christian faith. "I'm a millionaire," he said, "and I attribute it all to the rich blessings of God in my life. I remember the turning point in my faith. I had just earned my first dollar and I went to a church meeting that night. The speaker was a missionary who told about his work. I knew that I only had a dollar bill and had to either give it all to God's work or nothing at all. So at that moment I decided to give my whole dollar to God. I believe that God blessed that decision, and that is why I am a rich man today." He finished and there was an awed silence at his testimony as he moved toward his seat. As he sat down a little old lady sitting in the same pew leaned over and said to him: "I dare you to do it again."

I am here this morning to dare you to do it again. It is what some churches call the annual "Sermon on the Amount." Many such sermons point to the current budget

and invite the congregation to subscribe the bottom line. Some churches emphasize tithing, and the fact of the matter is that if members of a congregation tithed ten percent of their net income we would not have a financial worry at all. Of course the Biblical tithe was based on gross income, but let's not split hairs. The tithe model seems heavy-handed to some people or old fashioned and out of vogue. There are still some churches that base their stewardship campaign on guilt and promises of a heavenly reward. Or there are preachers like the shrewd minister who desperately needed funds for his struggling church. He stood up in his pulpit and announced: "Brothers and sisters, I have before me this morning THREE sermons: a one thousand dollar sermon that lasts five minutes, a five hundred dollars sermon that lasts one hour, and a two hundred dollar sermon that lasts two hours. We shall now take up the offering, and the amount received will determine the sermon preached!" Needless to say, the church solved its financial crises.

Paul's letter to Timothy suggests a very different frame of mind. He encourages Timothy to instruct the people of means to be generous because out of their largess their future is secured.

Now right away we notice something different. When wealthy people are mentioned in the New Testament it is not usually a happy report. We are told how difficult it is for them to enter the Kingdom of God; as difficult as passing through the eye of a needle. We hear about the rich man dressed in purple who failed to feed the starving man at the front gate to his house. That man suffers in hell. Or we read with regret about the rich man who would follow after Jesus but could not give up his wealth to do so.

In the letter to Timothy Paul does not suggest that the rich renounce their wealth. They are not condemned. They are not told to take all that they have, sell it, and give it to the poor. They are warned not to let their wealth make them haughty and not to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches. The first results in illicit pride and the second an unwarranted sense of security.

Wealth and good looks are two of the least reasons to presume superiority. It is said that God pickles the proud and preserves the foolish. During the Battle of the Wilderness in the Civil War, Union general John Sedgwick was inspecting his troops. At one point he came to a parapet, over which he gazed out in the direction of the enemy. His officers suggested that this was unwise and perhaps he ought to duck while passing the parapet. "Nonsense," snapped the general. "They couldn't hit an elephant at this dist--." Sedgwick fell to the ground, fatally wounded.¹

The pride of wealth can take us down just as quickly as enemy fire. Economic history is redundant with stories told of fortunes earned and lost. No matter how hard we have worked or how diligently we have saved, the markets can crash, the banks can fail, and fraudulent financial managers can abscond with our investments and savings. Wealth is too fickle a thing to take much pride in. And for that same reason we dare not put our hope in what can so easily be lost.

Now before I go any further, neither Paul nor I have said anything about not working hard, making wise investments, and saving. There is no suggestion that

¹ *Today in the World*, August 30, 1993; <http://www.sermonillustrations.com/a-z/p/pride.html>. Electronic. Downloaded 9/23/10.

making and having wealth is immoral. As a matter of fact it would be irresponsible of any religious leader to suggest that we should be anything less than fiscally responsible. The question that Paul raises is whether our identity and sense of self comes from our wealth. Do our ultimate values rest in money and materials? If they do, we are in trouble. If wealth is a means of pride we are impoverished. If wealth is a means of grace we are enriched.

As a matter of fact, Paul states that wealth is a joyous responsibility. He argues that wealth is given to some people for a purpose, and that purpose is the service of human beings. To put it another way, God gave us riches so that we would know the joy of giving it away. Everything that we have, no matter how great or small, is a gift of providence. And when we celebrate the gifts of life and share them with others we are drawn closer to God. It is in the very act of sharing that we enter Sacred Space, Sacred Relationships, and Sacred Grace.

Winston Churchill wrote, “We make a living by what we get. We make a life by what we give.” And real life, the life of meaning and profound joy, emerges in generous acts of kindness and selfless benevolence. A life that is hoarded often turns to worm and dust. Consider Paganini’s violin. The great violinist, Nicolo Paganini, willed his marvelous violin to Genoa, the city of his birth, but only on condition that the instrument never be played again. It was an unfortunate condition, for it is a peculiarity of wood that as long as it is used and handled, it shows little wear. As soon as it is discarded, it begins to decay. The exquisite, mellow-toned violin has become worm-eaten in its beautiful case, valueless except as a relic. The moldering

instrument is a reminder that a life withdrawn from service to others loses its meaning.²

Now there is one final point I want to make about Paul's letter to Timothy. He said that when the wealthy are generous "they store up treasure for themselves as a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of that which is truly life." Historically the Christian tradition has taken this to mean that if the wealthy are generous they will go to heaven or have some rich reward in the afterlife. I have difficulty with that interpretation because I have no means to authenticate a reward in the afterlife. Most wealthy people did not get their wealth with blinkers on. Their wealth came by hard work and a keen awareness of resources, capital, and market conditions. I also think that such an interpretation is morally cheap. If that is the case then what we are really brokering here is an eternal insurance policy that has more to do with the preservation of the self than a genuine love for the poor and the joy that comes from serving them.

I think that what Paul means to hold out is a vision of a real life when all who are willing to work can do so, where children can be educated, and where women are treated as whole moral, economic, and political partners. Paul consistently holds up the values of God's Kingdom against the values of Roman occupation. Real life or that which is truly life in the realm of God is safe, non-violent, and free of any form of tyranny. That is the kind of life that every one of us can bank on. That is the only kind of community that will have a future.

² *Bits & Pieces*, June 25, 1992.

I have no doubt that Paul is writing about wealthy Christians and his vision of their generosity for the disenfranchised. He believes that we are drawn close to God by serving the poor, caring for a neighbor in need, and opening up storehouses for the dispossessed. Paul had no reservations about the call of all Christians, regardless of their scale of their wealth, to reach out and help those in need.

And I think that if Paul were with us today he would also make the case that we have to sustain the very institutions that keep this Gospel message alive, confront the powers and principalities of contemporary tyranny, and front the values of the Kingdom of God. If he were to read the covenant of University Congregational Church I believe he would say, “Yes, you got it right. We worship and work that peace, justice, and brotherhood will prevail in this world.”

If we expect the principles of justice to even have a toehold on this planet we must have a vigorous Christian education ministry. I do not simply mean Sunday school for children. I mean life span Christian education that lays the foundations of God’s compassion and service, strengthens those lessons throughout the years, and pushes us deeper into the wisdom of peace and justice. University Congregational Church is taking huge steps to fulfill the vision of life span Christian Education. We offer progressive Christian education on Sunday mornings to children and adults; we have initiated the Religion and Life series that has covered issues such as “World Religions” and “America’s Nature Writers.” Both as Christian Education and outreach we initiated the Robert Meyers Lecture series that has brought us scholars from the Jesus Seminar and Robin Meyers with *Saving Jesus from the Church*. This year’s

guest, Dr. Richard Hughes, will challenge the presumption of a “Christian America.” Our adult discussion group engages a variety of topics from atheism to art and religion. We have grown our adult Sunday morning program to include the “Living the Questions” series by prominent scholars Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan. I have taken on the responsibility of offering Bible studies and membership orientation classes.

Next spring our confirmation class will take a whole new direction as we begin the class with a weekend retreat that will not only lay the foundations for Christian discipleship but also give to these children a rich experience in community building. And most exciting is the addition of mentors for each confirmand. These adults will partner with a confirmation student from the beginning of the retreat until youth Sunday when they are received into the church. These partners in discipleship will work together on the ropes course, experience trust building activities, and talk gently into the night. In the past two years our youth ministry has taken on the dimension of mission work, having served in the restoration of Greensburg and at Heifer Ranch.

I believe this is how we prepare people for the future of God’s kingdom. We worship together so that peace, justice, and brotherhood may prevail in this world. I am not the one to speak about the quality of the message I offer you each week.

I am obviously not the perfect pastor. But for all my imperfection, I can tell you that we have an excellent music program. Bob Scott brings us quality music Sunday after Sunday. I have enjoyed the challenging music that he has brought us

such as Karl Jenkins, “The Armed Man,” and Antonio Vivaldi’s “Gloria.” Bob had a vision of bringing college students to our choir to swell the quality, assist them financially, and provide a venue for them to share their talent. We are blessed by this gift.

Like any church program the challenge for our music ministry is the growth and development of this splendid program. It is a challenge because there are a variety of musical tastes, just as there are varieties of musical genres. How do we inspire and maintain theological integrity? How do we balance classical chorale music with contemporary strains? I do not have the answers for that but I know that this choir director, our wonderful keyboardist Helen Griffin, and this gifted program will show us the way. This year we are now creating a youth choir for middle and senior high youth with a new choir director, Lauren Hirsch. We have purchased new hymnals with the hope that we would have a more inclusive congregational singing.

There are several dimensions to our outreach ministry that I would like to touch upon. The Community Action Task Force will complete its work this fall and offer a full report to the congregation. I can tell you that they are recommending that we adopt an “open door” approach to outreach that encourages people with a passion for social justice to bring an idea or proposal to the Outreach Board, develop that plan and implement it. The “Head to Toe” hygiene pantry is one such idea and we look forward to opening the pantry on Saturday, October 2nd. In the meantime Outreach at UCC means continuing the youth mission trips, support for Youthville, and financial support for Envision, Rainbows United and Futures

Unlimited for the visually impaired or children with special needs. The Women's Guild hosts a baby blanket project for Honduras, and their baby shower provides a layette with baby clothes and diapers for needy moms in Wichita. We collect crayons and coloring books for Honduran children, a program that Barbara McKee initiated several years ago. Our special collection for relief in Haiti offered \$3,105. The Outreach Board sponsored a Wine Tasting dinner and the proceeds went to the Kansas Food Bank and Interfaith Ministry. Our annual "Angel Tree" at Christmas purchased gifts for 12 families. Our Christmas Eve offering is given to WSU's Campus Ministry program. And this list is not exhaustive. Nearly all of this money was generated above and beyond the church's operating budget.

Within our operating budget is one of largest outreach projects of UCC, the college student scholarships for our choir. We are recommending for our 2011 budget \$16,000 for continuing this project that certainly helps students make ends meet but also enriches our worship service beyond counting.

Our outreach ministry took a new turn this fall when we hosted the "Prayers for Peace" service on September 11th. This interfaith service began the process of building bridges of trust with our Muslim and Jewish neighbors. The next step that appears to be emerging is a quarterly potluck event that would rotate amongst participating congregations. My hope is that when people in Wichita and throughout Kansas think of University Congregational Church they will say, "Yes, that's the church that honors the dignity of every race and religion."

There are many other developments in the life of our congregation that point to a vital church. We finished our new office suites and we are working on the next

phases of building a conference room, media center, and new space for our middle and high school classes. We have completed a Marketing Plan that we will roll out to the congregation at the completion of our stewardship campaign. We joined the National Association of Congregational Christian Churches.

This is the result of wealth: The wealth of vision, the wealth of ideas, the wealth of leadership, the wealth of planning, the wealth of talent, and the financial wealth that is absolutely necessary for any promising congregation. This is wealth that will build a future that will cherish and invigorate the values of God's justice, peace, and brotherhood. These are the benchmarks of a thriving and transforming church. I dare you to do it again – and then some!

Finis