

**Summary:**

“Looking In, Looking Out,” the second of three messages in our series, “It’s a Wonder-Full Life,” by Rev. Jay Anderson at Church of the Master United Methodist, Sunday, November 17, 2019

**Detail:**

Have you ever wondered what your life would have been like if you’d made different choices at certain times? What if you had gone to a different school?

Who would or wouldn’t be in your life?

Would you live here or somewhere else? do what you do or did for a living? have even met the person you married?

Similar to that is the question, if you could go back in time and change something about your life or in history, would you? And if so, what would it be? Would it be something to do with history - prevent the assassination of Abraham Lincoln or John Kennedy for example, or would it be something more personal? Would it be something major and obvious, like what school you went to or what career you chose, or would it be something more private?

For many years I used to think that if I could go back in time I would try to keep my father from dying of a heart attack when I was a child. Later in life, though, when experience allowed me to think more deeply about that,

I began to wonder how my life would have been different had he lived. Would it have been better, or might it have been worse? Would I have still gone to college?

Would I have made the same decisions I made about marriage, career and kids if my father had lived?

Would I even still be alive now if he had lived then?

This wonderment can provide an interesting exercise in mental gymnastics so long as you don't travel too deep down that rabbit hole.

This is not unlike the experience George Bailey is undergoing with the help of the junior angel, Clarence.

George receives the gift of seeing what the world would have been like without him - if history had changed and he had never been born. And I say it's a gift because he is given the chance to see how important his presence and his life have been, what impact he has made on so many people and to his community. That is a gift, isn't it? It's almost like being able to attend your own funeral or wake and hearing people talk about how much they loved you, or how much you or what you did meant to them. It's a way of affirming that who and how you are, what you do or did matters to other people - that you made a difference in peoples' lives.

We are called to live an "incarnational" faith - that is, a faith that is more than a mere collection of ideas or beliefs, but that is lived out in what we do, in the actions we take.

The decisions we, as Christians, make about what we do or don't do are a reflection of our faith in Jesus Christ and how we have chosen to live out that faith.

Sometimes those decisions are big, other times less so, but every decision we make means saying YES to something, and in turn, saying NO to something else.

Our first scripture today comes from what we know as the Sermon on the Mount. This sermon, more than anything else in the New Testament, tells us how Jesus modeled for us who and how God is, and how we are to be as followers of Jesus Christ, juxtaposing what the world says is valuable against what holds kingdom value, and inviting us to see that it is our motivation and the “state of our heart” that is the key to righteousness, or right living.

“Storing up treasures in heaven,” as Jesus put it, is to concentrate on the riches, the blessings that come with right relationship, love, grace, generosity.

These are the “incorruptible” things that don’t rust, that can’t be eaten by moths, rather than the accumulation of things or stuff that can become “gods” in and of themselves. Jesus said we cannot serve two masters because we’ll love one and despise the other - we can’t serve God and money. So, how we “spend” our gifts and treasures - not just our money but also our time and our energy - is the best indicator of what we love, what we value, and of how we want to impact the world.

This week’s passage and message invites us to become more courageous, intentional, and visionary about how we serve and worship God through our ‘expenditures.’

Theologian Matthew Skinner writes,

*“The true value of monetary wealth, therefore, lies not in its power to accumulate possessions in pursuit of power and comfort. Wealth enables generosity, and a generous heart has its sights set on God.”*

He’s saying that first of all it is our attitude about God and about money that shapes our generosity.

He goes on to say that how we use money identifies what we care about most deeply, what is most important to us - it can tell us what our other gods, our idols are.

At the same time, he also says that it doesn’t first require a change of heart to change how we serve God with our money; we can lead with the money and allow *that* to change our hearts. Perhaps you’ve heard the admonition that *you can’t think your way into a new way of living, you have to live your way into a new way of thinking.*

In a similar manner, Skinner is suggesting that “our hearts can be made to follow where our treasure goes.”

If we invest our treasure into a certain cause or ministry then our hearts, in turn, will expand to care about that cause or ministry more deeply.

And as our hearts expand then our time and energy will follow our treasure into care for the cause or ministry. And he concludes this thought by saying,

*“Giving a gift, putting money toward uses that promote God’s vision of righteousness, may help a heart receive a taste of what God desires for the world.”*

As Jesus said, “where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” I don’t think he cares which gets there first because he knows the other will follow.

So then the question becomes more about wonderment. It becomes about vision - and attitude.

Do we believe God is a God of abundance (of enough) or a God of scarcity (of not enough)?

Do we believe God can do new things through us if we are open to hearing God's hopes and dreams, or do we believe that God no longer speaks to us and that the die has been cast? Do we believe that the God who is love desires for everyone to have enough, or that God's plan is for some to have abundance while others have nothing?

The thing is - and this is important and true across our faith practices - our view of God shapes who we are and how we are, in our life and faith generally but specifically with how we think about our time, talents, and treasures. If we view God as loving and generous then we tend to be loving and generous ourselves.

Conversely, if we view God as angry, judgmental and to be feared, then we tend to be angry, judgmental and afraid, and that often manifests itself in a lack of generosity toward others. As followers of Jesus Christ, however, our view of God, our understanding of who and how God is, should be shaped by how Jesus was.

In this passage from Matthew Jesus also speaks metaphorically about the eye as the lamp of the body.

He suggests that our vision of the world, of life, of God, can either be a source of darkness, distrust, greed, envy, and overall negativity, or it can be a source of light, love, and generosity. It can't be both. We can't serve two masters. But changing how we view things, our vision,

requires some inner work on our part. One way we might begin that inner work is to adopt a sense or practice of curiosity, of “wondering.”

When we shift our internal self-talk or worldview from one of judgement to one of curiosity, this actually increases two other attributes: we have more **compassion** for our past money issues and more **creativity** as we imagine changing those things that hold us captive to fear. So, adopting a sense of curiosity or wonderment might lead us to ask, “I wonder why I have this habit of ‘retail therapy’ when I get depressed?”

This can be a question that helps us to compassionately uncover a false belief about the power of “things” to make us feel secure or happy, those “earthly treasures” Jesus talked about. When we go further to ask ourselves, “I wonder what my faith has to say about what really offers the security I desire?” we’re invited to creatively imagine a spiritual practice such as making a gratitude list instead of going shopping the next time this urge arises.

This becomes part of our courageous vision we are intentionally naming in order to bring our money and generosity practices into the realm of spiritual practice.

One writer, when sharing about the sense of fear that seems to overwhelm her each month when she sits down to pay bills, shared how adopting a sense of wonder and curiosity helped displace her sense of dread.

“When I feel afraid (for instance, before doing the monthly bills), I have been practicing starting my sentences with ‘I wonder,’ and I can say that this curiosity practice has helped me tremendously (I wonder

how I will creatively solve the increased cash flow demands this month!). It begins to put me in a state of imagining rather than dreading. Like all practices, it takes a while to retrain the brain, but with repetition, it begins to shift my attitude about bill-paying.”

This idea of “looking in,” to more closely align with God our outlook, our “looking out,” requires a deepening self-awareness. Becoming more in tune with what feels truly life-giving and what feels dread-producing will give us good clues about what our hearts desire for the long-haul and therefore, how we “spend” our time and money—what “treasures” we pursue. As I said earlier, whether our heart leads our treasures or our treasures lead our heart doesn’t matter, it’s the destination that counts.

And that destination is to live in the image and likeness of the extravagantly generous God who created us.

In my early adulthood, when I was trying to build a career and family and do all of those things that author David Brooks, in his book *The Second Mountain*, would refer to as “first mountain” things, I gave to the church or to charity from whatever was left over after the bills were paid and stuff was bought. And it was hard.

We had a house, and two cars, and two kids, and like most people we wanted nice stuff. Our priority was around accumulation and comfort. But as my faith journey deepened I began thinking differently about things, including how I handled money.

A couple of years after my divorce, I decided to change careers. I had wanted to do that years earlier, but the financial pressure my wife

and I had put on ourselves required a certain income in order to pay the bills.

I was a captive, trapped in a prison of my own making, built out of materialism, debt, and mistrust.

After I made the decision to work toward making a career change, it was as though I had been released, but was on parole - no longer captive but not yet free.

I didn't know what my next career was going to be, but I trusted that God did.

By the time I made the leap from retail to real estate, I had enough saved to cover one year of my former salary. I knew that I could put myself wholeheartedly into real estate with worrying about money for a year.

And I knew, having prayed about it for years, that God was guiding me through this. And it was then that I stepped out in faith and became a tither, no longer giving from my leftovers, but from the first fruits - the first check written when a commission was earned.

Well, that first commission was six months in coming, and when I sat down after receiving that check for \$3600.00 to write my bills, the hardest thing I had to do was write a check, right off the top, for 10%, \$360.00.

I knew that's what I had promised I would do in one of those, "God, if you'll do this for me I'll devote my life to you" kind of prayers. But now it was real, and was one of those things that both hurt and felt good at the same time, you know? There was some fear, mixed with joy.

That's how I became a tither; out of gratitude that God had led me to where I was. I adopted an "attitude of gratitude" as they say - sometimes my heart led my treasure and sometimes my treasure led my heart - but from then on I have given ten percent.

By the end of my second year in real estate I my earnings equalled the salary I left behind at Kmart.

By year four I made twice as much, still tithed ten percent, and I never worried about whether there would be enough to pay the bills. However, it took a lot of inner work and faith before I got to that point.

It's that inner work, that "looking in," that molds into the shape of God our "outlook." The passage from Timothy addresses this, as Paul writes,

*"Tell people who are rich...not to become egotistical and not to place their hope on their finances, which are uncertain. Instead, they need to hope in God, who richly provides everything..."*

That inner work leads us to check the alignment of our money practices with both ours and God's vision.

Are we creating the impact for which we hope? or at least moving in that direction?

When our practices—no matter how incremental or seemingly simple—are serving the vision, we live with a sense of

wholeheartedness and wonder that energizes us, those around us, and the world - Paul's idea of "truly living."

Money, when coupled with the alignment of kingdom values and a vision for a more just world, can result in the kind of generosity that gives life not only to the mission, but also to the giver.

Last week we shared with you how, thanks to your generosity, our Education and Worship ministries positively impacted lives. Then we shared a bit of the vision for how God is calling us to make an even bigger impact for Christ through those ministries next year.

Today, we'll do the same things with our Missions area.

As you leave worship today you'll receive a copy of what is called a Narrative Budget, a document that groups everything we do as a church into five areas - Worship, Education, Mission, Fellowship, and Congregational Care -

and shows how much we budgeted this year in these five areas. But more than numbers, it shares the broader story of the impact we've made along with our courageous vision for what we hope to do next year. When our giving serves the vision, then we live with a sense of wholeheartedness and connectedness, to both God and community, that brings us true life.

This idea of "looking out," after we have done the spiritual work of "looking in" suggests the idea of "looking out for..." Who are we ultimately looking out for? How do we balance our need to care for our own well-being and also look out for the bigger picture?

Jeremiah 29 tells us that God has a plan for us, a plan to prosper us, it says. But what is “prosperity” really? How can we redefine it? The root of the word *prosperity* is the Latin, *prosperare*, that literally means, “to cause to succeed” or “to render happy.” Well, there it is. “Happiness” and “success” are things that are not just based in money (although our 21st century world might allude that they are), but rather can be translated into a state of well-being that ultimately depends on our interconnectedness with the well-being of others. Additionally, the Old Latin roots point to “according to one’s hopes” (*Pro* = “for” and *spes* = “hope”).

For what do we hope? What we hope for, what we value, what we build is where we will put our resources, our treasures - both monetary and non-monetary.

But we’re not talking about what, in the 19th and 20th centuries, became known as the “prosperity gospel.”

This theological view equates poverty and sickness with sin and ignores systemic oppression with the idea that anyone should be able to prosper if they are “good enough” or work “hard enough.”

Some televangelists and TV preachers use the idea of one’s financial donations being returned “seven-fold” as con-games that prey on the emotions of those who were experiencing financial instability. Joel Osteen and his ilk aside, this is an opportune time to refute that movement and introduce you to the idea, found in liberation theology, of God’s “preferential option for the poor” as an opposing interpretation.

God doesn't care whether or not you're wealthy, God cares about how much YOU care about that, and how that shapes who and how you are.

Prosperity in God's economy isn't about helping some become wealthy while others of God's children don't have a place to sleep, clothes to wear, food to eat, or access to health care or medicine.

We can all share the gifts of "Generosity" and "hospitality" because they don't rely solely on our ability to give money. We all know people who are extravagantly generous but who don't necessarily have a lot of money.

Generosity, hospitality, and graciousness are all attitudes that, if we don't have them now, we can develop with time. So whether we are able to be monetary benefactors or whether our benevolence comes in time and effort, when we are "rich in awareness" of how our everyday practices affect others, we can be faithful stewards of how we "spend" our assets.

Let me share four sets of names with you.

If these names are familiar to you, raise your hand.

-Edwin Elmer Burtner

-John and Phebe Barnes

-William, Eleanor, and Mary Cooper

-Noah E. Cornetet

I don't know these people. whether they were rich or poor or whether they gave a lot of money to the church. But I do know this much. The people who were part of this church nearly a century ago thought enough of these people and their witness of faith and generosity of spirit at least if not their generosity in giving, to dedicate the four pillars on the front of this church building in their names. Those are the names that, a century ago, the people who sat where you sit now, thought would make a positive statement about who we are as church and as followers of Jesus Christ to the surrounding community. These four pillars from within the church are memorialized now as four pillars who are the face of the church.

We are bombarded with messages of what we need "right now" in order to feel "worth-y-ness."

Keeping a courageous vision before us helps us look at the bigger picture and weigh our choices in terms of how they support or distract from that vision.

In the film *It's a Wonderful Life*, director Frank Capra juxtaposes the Bailey family and George Bailey in particular with the Potter family and Old Man Potter.

The film presents the collision between outlooks, one of fear, greed, scarcity, accumulation, and winning at all costs, and the other of faith, trust, abundance, sharing and community building.

The difference between the Baileys and the Potters of the world comes both in the inner and outer worlds.

Do we reap love and generosity or bitterness and resentment?

This week we're invited to look *in* to prayerfully consider how to align our *outer* money practices with God's vision for us.

Are we making an impact for Jesus in the lives of people as we hope?

Are we at least moving in that direction?

How is God inviting you to make an impact through your giving to support the vision, the mission, and the ministries of the church next year?

In addition to the Narrative Budget document you will receive today, you should have received in the mail this week a letter from Greg Shaw, along with an Estimate of Giving Card for next year. If not, we'll have them in worship next week.

I hope you will read the Narrative Budget document as you prayerfully consider this week what percentage of your income God is calling you to give to support these life-impacting ministries next year.

Next Sunday in worship we will receive your commitments so that we can begin the work of preparing our budget for next year. A budget is a moral document, a visionary document, that speaks to who, whose, and how we are. When our practices—no matter how incremental or seemingly simple—serve God's vision, then we live with a sense of wholeheartedness and wonder that energizes us, those around us, and the world; it is then, that as Paul phrased it, we "truly live" a wonder-full life. Amen.