

Faith, Love and Money

Psalms 91:1-6, 14-16 & 1 Timothy 6:6-19

Rev. James Ramsey, September 30, 2013, **View From the Ancient Pew** Series #3



I'm worried about money... What about you? I worry about my bills. I worry about my parents' bills. I worry about how I am going to pay for college. I worry about future medical bills. I worry about my retirement. I worry I spend too much and save too little. I worry that prices keep going up. I worry my vehicle will need a major repair. I worry about the stock market.

I worry about East Union Church.

Summer always seems to be a lean time. Not as many of our members attend worship and not as many place their offerings in the plate. So when fall rolls around we find ourselves in a real pinch. I don't know whether you worry about East Union Church finances – but I know the elders do. It's hard to hear the Treasurer's Report at Session meetings.



We've called a congregational meeting for the second Sunday in October to talk about money. We need to withdraw \$35,000 from our Geiser Fund in order to continue to pay our bills. We are very fortunate to have such a fund, but it is dwindling at an alarming rate. Earlier this year we withdrew a large chunk of money to buy the new boiler. We hope to replenish that money and you have been giving to make that happen, so that we have collected about 9,000 of the 35,000 we used. Still, we cannot continue to rely on the Geiser Fund as we will do this year and as we have done in previous years. If we continue to deplete the fund in such a way, it will be gone in as little as two years.



And then we're in a real pickle and will be forced to make some drastic decisions, as far as staff and building maintenance, probably both.

We have tightened the budget these last few years, with little effect on the general schedule and program of the church. But further tightening will begin to affect services we have taken for granted and have come to expect. We have a bustling church – with a lot going on. We have robust programming, a robust campus – but we don't have robust giving. Collectively, we give as if East Union is a small church with not much going on. We give as if we have a little church building and aren't receiving much from the facilities. We give as if much of what we get is free (IT'S NOT) or, at least, someone else will pay for it. (THEY WON'T)

So I'm worried.

We do have people in our congregation who are on fixed incomes, who are giving as much as they can give, who cannot safely give any more. (You know who you are.) But we also have people, I suspect, who have expendable income, who are not giving as much as they can give, and who could safely give more to the church. (You know who you are.) God does not ask us to give beyond our means, but neither does God appreciate it when we squander, hoard or misappropriate our means.



We are in the middle of a sermon series now focusing on the Letters to Timothy. I call it VIEW FROM THE ANCIENT PEW. The letters address young Timothy. His mentor, a more experienced and older church leader, writes to him with advice for living the Christian life and leading the people of God. It seems the early church had many of the struggles we still have today. There was clearly a concern for money. They worried about money. Like us, 2000 years ago people were enticed by the promise of wealth and all that it brings – even people trying to live the life of faith, even Timothy.



Some joker once observed that he'd never seen a hearse pulling a U-Haul – which is a round-about way of saying, "You can't take it with you!" Timothy was reminded: "we brought nothing into the world, so that we can take nothing out of it." The "love of money" seemed enough of a "root of all kinds of evil" that it presented a pressing pastoral problem for the earliest Christians. Perhaps it still does for the most modern of Christians. People have always spent their money on questionable things.

Have you ever heard of a money tree?



There are several wooded areas around England where passersby have been stopping for centuries, meticulously hammering small denomination coins into trees. Most of the trees seem to be in and around Cumbria, Portmeirion, and North Yorkshire. According to a recent article by the BBC, the practice might date back to the early 1700s in Scotland where ill people stuck florins into trees with the idea that the tree would take away their sickness. The practice persists even today.

There are entire trunks completely covered with coins. We want good health, nice cars, the latest electronics, premium cable, granite countertops, stainless steel appliances, expensive toys. But these come at a price...and they reveal our priorities.

Jesus says in the Sermon on the Mount: 'Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. (Matthew 6:19-21)



These words of Jesus ring in the background of Timothy's letter. He is urged to shun the hoarding of worldly treasure, rather...his heart is to pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance, gentleness. --- by seeking these things – in Jesus' lingo...by seeking first the Kingdom of God, Timothy could "take hold of eternal life."

There are clear threats to our spiritual health – including, as Timothy is instructed, the love of money — threats so subtle and so powerful that the best way to deal with them is to stay away from them.

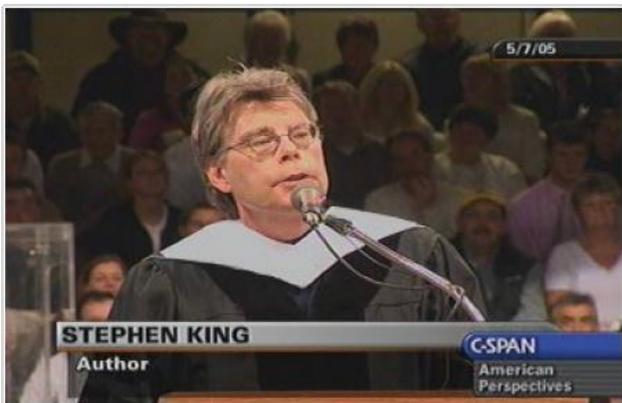


Obviously, we live in a world that runs on money. But the lure of money and all the things it makes possible are so dangerous to our souls that we have to confront them.

And one of the best ways to do that is by faithfully opening our hands and giving a good portion of it away...so that God's purposes might be done.

The Apostle Paul addresses Timothy and all Christians, warning them not to allow their wealth to make them “haughty, or to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches.” Rather, Paul says, set your hope “on God who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment.” And lest we miss the point, he spells it out for us: “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.”

Notice Paul doesn't say they should be generous and ready to share because the church has bills to pay, programs to run, people to help -- though no doubt Paul would agree with that. No, he says they should be “rich in good works, generous, and ready to share” because by so doing they “*take hold of the life that really is life.*” They should be generous because it's the godly way to live.



This message was beautifully echoed by Stephen King...the wildly popular and famous author of horror fiction. I'm not a fan of that genre, but those who are have noticed explicitly Christian themes in his novels, and he has acknowledged that in interviews. King gave a memorable commencement speech at Vassar College (Vassar is located in Poughkeepsie, New York, about 75 miles north of New York City.) He told how he came to understand this very idea that the Letter to Timothy lifts up:

“[F]or we brought nothing into the world, so that we can take nothing out of it.”

While walking down the road one day in 1999, King was struck and severely injured by a minivan. In the speech, he referred to both his accident and to the earning potential of the graduates, saying:



“Well, I'll tell you one thing you're not going to do, and that's take it with you. I'm worth I don't exactly know how many millions of dollars ... and a couple of years ago I found out what “you can't take it with you” means. I found out while I was lying in the ditch at the side of a country road, covered with mud and blood and with a severely broken leg.



I had a MasterCard in my wallet, but when you're lying in the ditch with broken glass in your hair, no one accepts MasterCard. ... We all know that life is ephemeral, but on that particular day and in the months that followed, I got a painful but extremely valuable look at life's simple backstage truths: We come in naked and broke. We may be dressed when we go out, but we're just as broke. ... And how long in between? ... Just the blink of an eye.”

King went on to discuss what the graduates could do with their earnings in the time they had in that eye-blink:

“... for a short period ... you and your contemporaries will wield enormous power: the power of the economy, the power of the hugest military-industrial complex in the history of the world, the power of the American society you will create in your own image. That's your time, your moment. Don't miss it.”

But then he added:

“Of all the power which will shortly come into your hands ... the greatest is undoubtedly the power of compassion, the ability to give.”

We have enormous resources in this country — resources you yourselves will soon command — but they are only

yours on loan. ... I came here to talk about charity, and I want you to think about it on a large scale. Should you give away what you have? Of course you should. I want you to consider making your lives one long gift to others, and why not? ... All you want to get at the getting place ... none of that is real. All that lasts is what you pass on. The rest is smoke and mirrors.”

And here's one more thing Stephen King said:

“Giving isn't about the receiver or the gift but the giver. It's for the giver. One doesn't open one's wallet to improve the world, although it's nice when that happens; one does it to improve one's self. I give because it's the only concrete way I have of saying that I'm glad to be alive and that I can earn my daily bread doing what I love. ... Giving is a way of taking the focus off the money we make and putting it back where it belongs — on the lives we lead, the families we raise, the communities which nurture us.”

Stephen King preaches a good sermon.

He clearly understands that giving helps us grow in the Spirit. We talk in church about other such practices: They include prayer, Bible study, confession of sins, worship,



**Giving Cheerfully...
Living Generously**

mission. These habits help us avoid superficiality in our faith, which surely is “the curse of our age.” It rings true for us that “the doctrine of instant satisfaction is a primary spiritual problem.” By adopting faithful habits, we begin to “move beyond surface living into the depths.

And we learn to appreciate the world as God would have us appreciate it.

Generosity helps us avoid superficiality in our faith. It makes for strong, healthy spiritual people and churches. When we're worried about doing good, helping others, feeding the hungry, caring for children, giving water to the thirsty, and homes for the homeless, we're not so worried about money.

It is natural to worry about money, but it dare not be our highest priority or our greatest worry....instead, we must do good, share generously and take hold of the life that is really life!

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