

Meadowbrook Congregational Church
“At Your Best”
August 9, 2010
Reverend Art Ritter

Luke 12:32-40

32 ‘Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom.

33 Sell your possessions, and give alms. Make purses for yourselves that do not wear out, an unfailing treasure in heaven, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys. 34 For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

35 ‘Be dressed for action and have your lamps lit; 36 be like those who are waiting for their master to return from the wedding banquet, so that they may open the door for him as soon as he comes and knocks. 37 Blessed are those slaves whom the master finds alert when he comes; truly I tell you, he will fasten his belt and have them sit down to eat, and he will come and serve them. 38 If he comes during the middle of the night, or near dawn, and finds them so, blessed are those slaves.

39 ‘But know this: if the owner of the house had known at what hour the thief was coming, he would not have let his house be broken into. 40 You also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.’

I read an article by Gary Rivlin that was printed in the *New York Times* exactly three years ago this week. Much in our economy has changed in the three years since the article was written but perhaps the change only makes the point of the author that much clearer. Rivlin was writing about what he called California’s Silicon Valley “working-class millionaires.” I had never heard of such a term—“working class millionaires.” At first I thought the whole idea was ridiculous, perhaps a sketch designed for *Saturday Night Live*. But the more I read, the more the entire idea began to be believable. The working-class millionaires are those who have made a substantial income but who still keep their noses to the grindstone. In a tough economy they are finding, much to their surprise, that even though they are working as hard as ever, they are unable to catch up with the wealth of others that surround them. The slump in technology companies prior to our nation’s general recession limited the growth of many people in the Silicon Valley who had made a million dollars but had hoped to make many millions more. Rivlin quotes Gary Kremen, the founder of the web-based Match.com who estimated his worth at \$10 million, firmly in the top half of 1 percent of all Americans. But such a figure did not place him where he wanted to be, in the upper echelon of those who lived in his actual community. So the man continued to log 60 to 80 hour work weeks because he believed that if he eased up even just a little bit, he would never make his goal. He said, “Everyone around here looks at the people above them...You’re nobody here at \$10 million.”

If you missed worship last week, you need to know that this morning’s Scripture lesson is a continuation of Jesus’ teaching about wealth and worry. Last week Jesus told the story of the Rich Farmer. He had so much extra grain and so many extra goods that he tore down his barns to build bigger ones. He then rested knowing that his future contentment and security was assured. But Jesus didn’t stop there. He went on and part of what he had to say is our Scripture lesson for this morning. “Don’t be afraid. It is God’s wish to give you what you need. Sell your possessions and give alms. Concentrate on heavenly treasure not upon earthly things. Be ready for action because God’s way comes when you may least expect it.”

Now none of us want to be beat up again with Jesus’ words about our money, our possessions, and our concern for our future security. I might have been able to get away with it last week in a sermon but if I preach the same message two weeks in a row I might have an uprising on my hands. Perhaps that is why my vacation starts tomorrow! Yet the lectionary

reading puts these two teachings on consecutive Sundays for a reason. I chose to believe God's hand in there someplace.

I was struck this week by the very beginning of this passage. Jesus says, "Don't be afraid." Where have we heard that before? Joseph and Mary heard the words just before they were told about their part in God's plan. The shepherds heard the words before they were told the good news about God coming to humankind in the form of a baby. Jesus has told us not to fear in the middle of a raging storm at sea in the midst of a dark night. Following his resurrection, Jesus said it to his followers as they contemplated what this Risen Lord might mean for their lives and for their world. But today we hear the words when Jesus is talking about money and possessions and wealth. "Do not be afraid."

Perhaps Jesus was trying to make an important point here, a clear distinction in our everyday motivation. We may feel guilty about our desire to have more and seek repentance from our sin of greed. But it is not greed that drives us to accumulate more. Instead it is our fear, our worry, and our anxiety. R. Alan Culpepper writes that "Anxiety must be a by-product of human freedom. ...Those who do not have enough to live on...naturally are anxious about how they will live. Those who have opportunities to develop a better life than they now enjoy worry about how they will get ahead. Those who have all they need and more are anxious about maintaining and protecting their wealth. Having more, then, is no solution to anxiety."

Jesus said, "Do not be afraid." Know where your treasure is. Do not let the search for more possess you. Do not view that which you want as necessity. Let it go. Live only the life that you have been called to live. Do not worry about tomorrow as if there will be a mighty test that will measure your ultimate worth. Faith is a pathway from fear because faith is the thing that points to the reality beyond our human desires. It is the assurance that despite all of our worry, all we really need for life will be provided by God. Faith is belief, not in measurable quantities like test scores, net worth, and business plans, but in grace and love and forgiveness. The Kingdom comes not when you have created it for yourself. It comes when you are at your best in God's eyes, letting go of that which controls you and giving to others from that which you treasure.

My father makes it a habit to buy his family instant lottery tickets for their birthday. Last month as Laura was scratching off her cards she told my dad over the phone, "If I win big with one of your tickets, I'll share the money with you." Perhaps this is how all of us think the Kingdom of God should work. Only when we find its riches, only when we've achieved it-then we can afford to share it with others. Jesus teaches us that this isn't how it works. The Kingdom of God comes here and now, immediately-in the trusting of God who has created us, in the letting go of our anxiety about what comes next, and in the giving to others of what we already have and are.

In a sermon, Rev. Patricia DeJong writes about two different kinds of tired. The first kind is that which we experience as a result of our anxiety and our fear. It is the feeling that nothing, not anything we can do, is going to make much of a difference in the world. She writes, "Underneath it all, after all of the running and fetching, spinning and moving, we worry that we don't make much of a difference, as if we have fallen off the course of what we hope our lives would mean." DeJong goes on to say that this kind of tired is produced by our frantic pre-occupation with secondary concerns- majoring in the minors; getting and having and doing because we never get enough of what we didn't want in the first place.

The second kind of tired is what Jesus is pointing us to seek. It is the joyful sense of being called into passionate discipleship. It is connecting with what is important. It is service that gives life. It is honoring that which God created us to be.

In his book *The Living Faith*, author Lloyd C. Douglas writes about an 18th century western explorer named Thomas Hearne. His party had journeyed to the Canadian Northwest Territories, searching for the mouth of the Coppermine River in the hopes of finding the Arctic Ocean. After a few days of river exploration, Hearne's party was attacked by a native tribe.

Most of their supplies were stolen. Hearne wrote this in his journal, "The weight of our baggage being so much lightened, our next day's journey was more swift and pleasant." Douglas was amazed at Hearne's response to his loss of supplies. He found the theft of most of his food provisions nothing more than an easing of the load. Had he been trapped in a cabin, resolved to spend the last days of his existence, living only upon that which he had stored up, the loss of such food would have probably worried him to death. Yet because he was on the move, searching for a greater purpose, the theft was viewed as a potential blessing.

Jesus teaches us that there is no greater freedom than when we are freed from our possessions that have begun to possess us. When we are prepared to trust God who gave us all the gifts of life in the first place, we can experience the pleasure that life is supposed to bring. "Do not be afraid," said Jesus. "It is God's good pleasure to give you the Kingdom."