

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 forever. 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. They wicked see it and are angry, they gnash their teeth and melt away, the desire of the wicked comes for nothing.

LUKE 12:13-21

Someone in the crowd said to Jesus, "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me." But Jesus said to him, "Friend, who set me to be a judge or arbitrator over you?" And Jesus said to them, "Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions."

Then he told them a parable: "The land of a rich man produced abundantly. And he thought to himself, 'What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?' Then he said, 'I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul, Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink

be merry.

But God said to him, “You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be? So, it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God.”

TREASURE HUNTING: PART I

FOLLOW THE MONEY

Psalm 112
Luke 12:13-21

It is a hard sell these days. Church attendance is steadily declining among the young. Unless you are attending one of the mega churches whose forte is entertainment, you are likely to look around you and see us—mostly over 60, wise enough to know we are (I don’t want to say, “over the hill”)—but certainly on the descending slope. Yes, we are the pillars, the engines that keep the church alive and moving.

It didn’t used to be this way. Vernon is fond of talking about his boyhood church, Maysville Presbyterian, down in Kentucky along the river, which had 800 members. And even First Presbyterian in Glendale had 100 in its youth group about 50 years ago. So what has happened? By what have we been replaced and why?

Changes in our social values have occurred and they always do as the younger generations grow up and begin to replace the more elder ones. When most of us on the descending slope were growing up, going to church was pretty much a given. We were affiliated with a denomination and church attendance was a normal part of life. There are lots of theories as to why that is no longer the case except, perhaps, for the evangelical South. But even that has begun to change and the demographics behind it are revealing. The average age of

evangelicals is now 55 while the average age of those unaffiliated with any religion is 37. And while 26% of seniors are white evangelicals, only 8% younger than 30 claim this identity. See a trend here?

That is the evidence of church decline even in the stronghold of the South. But it begs the question of what has replaced church attendance and why. Until 3 years ago, I was still umpiring youth baseball during the summer. When I first began 12 years before that, it was difficult to get assignments on Sundays. But in a brief number of years, it was difficult to get Sundays off. The number of traveling teams and tournaments exploded. And the season expanded as well, beginning earlier in mid-March and extending all the way to the end of July.

I recently read an interesting statistic. It did not surprise me, but it may stun you. According to a TD Ameritrade survey, nearly 20% of American families spend more than \$12,000 a year on youth sports, per child. Those are the big hitters, but a whopping 63% spend anywhere from \$100 to \$500 per child each month. The amount of life focus this requires of a family is enormous and obviously, many other things are sacrificed in the process...like church?

I will give you an example. My son, Sam, was married in September on his mother and stepfather's farm in Pleasant Plain. He and his new wife both love children (so I will have an opportunity to become a grandfather one day) and they designed the entire weekend to be family friendly and strongly encouraged friends and relatives to bring their kids. How many people actually *want* children at their wedding? And this had been planned and announced for months. One of my nephews RSVP'd and promised they would be coming and bringing their 3 young boys...until they got their eight-year-old's traveling soccer schedule for the fall. Sorry. He would have to miss 2 games that weekend. Can't make it. They later regretted their decision. Too late! They missed a memorable weekend and wonderful celebration of love

and nature.

I am not picking on youth sports. I think they are great and very much enjoyed my time officiating them. Rather, I am simply highlighting it as symptomatic of a change in values.

Why would parents give up taking vacations, funding their retirements, spending time in personal recreation and frankly, bracketing any spiritual development out of their lives for the sake of bingeing on their children's sports careers? It is the WHY? behind it that concerns me.

As is often the case, when you want to identify the why behind the wherefore, you simply follow the money. And that is what the big hitters will tell you. They are investing in their children's sports development on the outside chance that they will receive an athletic scholarship. In addition they want their kids to be happy and are willing to pay for that. Of course, if they did the math and considered the odds against getting a scholarship, they would see the folly of their investment.

Even so, what has transpired to create an environment for this approach to life is a devaluation of the importance of worship, a community of faith which nurtures and supports us in the difficult circumstances of life and celebrates with us the happy occasions along the journey. As our society has become more consumer oriented, it has also grown to be less concerned with community and spirituality.

Our scriptures for this morning speak eloquently to this issue. Apparently, this is not a new phenomenon. *Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me.* Follow the money. Jesus' response to him is a clear warning: *Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.* And in the

parable which follows, Jesus reminds his listeners that life is short and fragile and that its real purpose is not acquisition but in being rich toward God.

Let us be clear. Jesus does not suggest that having acquisitions is evil. No, it is greed that is the problem. In fact, when we analyze Psalm 112, there is a clear connection between delighting in God's commandments and wealth and riches. It almost sounds a little "Joel Osteen-ish." (Osteen is the Houston evangelical preacher who promotes the gospel of abundance.)

But I think "wealth and riches" can also be interpreted symbolically to refer to the quality of one's inner world. Because when you read on, you find a description of the approach to life taken by believers. *It is well with those who deal generously and lend, who conduct their affairs with justice...They have distributed freely, they have given to the poor; their righteousness endures forever; their horn is exalted in honor.*

It is a matter of emphasis, is it not? Pardon the pun, but what are we most *consumed* with? Are we always following the money? Charles Schulz, creator of "Peanuts" offered this test to help us think through the issue. Here are 6 questions for you...and it is not a competition for you to come up with the answers. You won't. Just ponder them and you will get the point:

1. Name the 5 wealthiest people in the world.
2. Name the last 5 Heisman trophy winners.
3. Name the last five winners of the Miss America pageant.
4. Name 10 people who have won the Nobel or Pulitzer Prize.
5. Name the last half dozen Academy Award winners for best actor or actress.
6. Name the last decade's worth of World Series winners.

Even if I gave you enough time, how would you do? The point is, none of us remember the

headliners of yesterday. And these are no second-rate achievers. They are the absolute best in their fields! Nevertheless, the applause dies...the awards tarnish...achievements are forgotten...accolades and certificates are buried with their owners.

We began this sermon with a question on our minds; namely, what has changed in our society which has made church attendance and membership so much less relevant than it was a couple of generations ago? Are we following the money now more than we used to? I doubt it. As our scriptures reveal, money has always been followed. And it is true that Sunday mornings have been hijacked by recreation and the church has not competed well. People do not seem to feel the need to worship and because most young people are no longer being brought up in the church, it is difficult to imagine that many will consider it in the future.

I am not trying to depress you. What we who are here must make certain we do is keep our emphasis upon the world, upon a compassionate response to those in need. I was very heartened by an article in USA TODAY which reported on the tremendous amount of assistance that faith based groups—such as Presbyterian Disaster Assistance—give to FEMA in its response to victims of nature's cataclysms across the country. It isn't just the money and supplies. It involves site setup and coordination of aid, use of local facilities and thousands of volunteers. Without the cooperation and people power of faith based groups, FEMA could not do an adequate job of responding to our increasing number of natural disasters.

We cannot control how other people manage their lives and whether money is the primary trail they follow. But we in the church must never lose sight of the trail we follow...the trail that Christ leads us on. And that is a trail of compassion—giving back in gratitude for the gift of life, for the abundance of the universe, for the many ways in which we have been assisted by God's little angels along our own journeys. Let us not worry about what others are going to do. Let

us keep our eyes upon the Cross.

Reverend Thomas Dunlap November 5, 2017