

November 11, 2007
Haggai 1:5b-2:9
Luke 18:15-27

Inheriting Eternal Life

“Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” This question is asked of Jesus by what some translators call “the rich ruler” or “the rich young ruler.” Jesus answers in a straightforward manner – fulfill the requirements of the Law. When the rich ruler states that he has done so, he never the less seems somehow unsatisfied, so Jesus offers an additional path: Sell everything – your house, your stocks and bonds, your IRAs, your vacation home, your camels and your chariots, your family antiques, the art work – everything! Give it all away and come, follow me.

As Noah said to God ala Bill Cosby, “Right!”

And Jesus is so sad for this man – it’s harder for a rich man to get into heaven than a camel to go through the eye of a needle. “Uh-oh!”, say the disciples. “ We’re **all** in trouble then.” Even those who didn’t make a whole lot knew that they were rich enough to qualify for and fail the needle test.

“Pas mal!”, (No worries!) says Jesus. You spend your lives well and God will take care of the rest.

This week an interesting study came across my desk. It is an analysis of how we spend not our money but our **hours** here in the USA. Are you ready for this?

On average, American adults spend out of 168 hours a week:

47.6 hours sleeping (47 divided by 7=6 ½ hours a night)
41.1 hours at work
19.8 hours watching TV and movies
8.0 eating
7.8 reading
6.0 shopping
4.3 playing music and games
3.4 commuting to and from work
2.2 doing some kind of physical activity for leisure
1.4 on the computer
1.2 in religious activity and volunteering
0.7 hours playing with their children

Another statistic: the average American adult gives 2% of his or her money to religious and charitable organizations.

Of course, Frog Ponders are above average!!

How are you spending your life? To what are you giving your days and your energy? where are you investing your resources – time, talent, money? There is another name for this question, this concept: stewardship.

This encounter (found - though different - in both Matthew and Mark's gospels) often shows up on Stewardship Sunday. You know – the day we talk about m-o-n-e-y. Just so you know what a responsible pastor I am, I took precautions this week in preparation for saying the “M” word in the sanctuary: sprinkled holy water, smudged with sage, did incantations to each corner of the universe.

Actually, I am teasing us. We have come to a point of maturity in this congregation, I believe, where we no longer get our selves all weird and goofy when we talk about money. That wasn't necessarily true even a few years ago. But it is now. We know that money is energy. We know that money empowers mission. We know that money well spent can save lives and transform communities. And we know that you can't be a faithful reader of the Bible - and especially of the Gospels - without talking about money. We know that money, wealth, riches, is the number 2 topic for Jesus – right after the realm of God (and often the two are tied together.) Jim Wallis of the Sojourners Community (and author of the best seller “God's Politics” and the advertising campaign in the last presidential election that read “God is not a Republican or a Democrat.”) demonstrated in a presentation he made here a couple of years ago that if you cut every thing out of the Bible that has anything to do with economics, it looks like a book of holes. The Bible has a lot to say about money.

And here is another example of that in Luke's gospel. But (I asked myself as I was reading the passage over and over this week) is this story really about money? Let's look at it again, starting (as I always do) with the context. In front of this passage is a passage about the blessing of children, about children (who obviously have no money) showing us the way to the realm of God. The passage following this encounter with the rich ruler describes the healing of a blind man (who also has no resources) who is sitting by the side of the road and asks Jesus for his sight which is granted because of his faith. When the blind man is healed, he does the Snoopy Dance of Joy to God, as does everyone around him who witnesses this miracle.

All three passages are less about money and more about God's grace. Less about material wealth and more about the realm of God. Less about how we spend our money and more about how we spend our lives.

So, how **are** you spending your life? Where is God's grace moving through you and how is your life and witness moving others to do the Snoopy Dance of Joy to God? Where is God's improbable grace creating impossible results and how are you being a channel for that kind of miracle? What is it in your life and vision that is worth risking it all? And what determines all that? This is an “encounter story” for those of us who wonder “what's all about”; who let fear shut us down, who might be hearing a call to risk more for the sake of a larger purpose, those who worry that there isn't enough to go around,

who won't take a chance today toward a brighter tomorrow. It is a reminder that when we invest our hearts and our gifts in God's kingdom, we needn't worry about the outcome as the only real failure is here is fear – fearing God and the grace of God, fearing life, fearing the future, fearing failure.

What does that mean for Frog Pond/Meridian United Church of Christ on Stewardship Sunday? We can talk about stewardship in terms of making sure we have enough money to cover the utilities (40% increase projected for 2008, by the way); we can talk about Sunday school curriculum and salaries for employees and the monster hit continue to take for cost of property and liability insurance (thanks to Hurricane Katrina and such.) It is true that stewardship of our resources makes all that possible. And without insurance and utilities and employees and curriculum and such, we would be hard pressed to function as a church.

But if we want to take Jesus seriously, on Stewardship Sunday, we might want to talk more about what is **so compelling** in our lives and in our life together that we are willing to risk it all, to give it all away, to stretch ourselves, go out on a limb, make a splash (you make up the metaphor!!)

We **are** different, you know. There is a reason that we are here in this particular church and spiritual tradition and not another. Not that there is anything necessarily wrong with other traditions (you know me better than that!), but we stand for something truly precious here. John Thomas, the current president of the United Church of Christ, put it so beautifully when he said that the UCC is about living out the radical inclusiveness of God, extending the extravagant grace of God, and having **the evangelical courage** to stand with the poor and the vulnerable as did Jesus. Many of our sisters and brothers in the wideness of the Christian church think we're off our rockers to have spent a million dollars to advertise on television and radio that "whoever you are, wherever you are on life's journey, you are welcome here." They don't believe that the church is for everyone nor that everyone is welcome in God's realm. You have probably had the kind of conversations I have with people who challenge you for even being a member of a church that welcomes gays and lesbians into membership, that has no "test of faith" for participation in the community, that welcomes everyone to the communion table, that feels happiest when its hallways and rooms are an untidy mess with the spilling over of Food Bank food and those in need of its resources.

But we do and we are. In a time when people all over the world are so fearful of those different than them that they are killing each other, we are willing to risk community. In a country that is so afraid of unseen enemies that we are willing to violate international standards of decency (like the Geneva Convention) and long honored principles of law (like habeas corpus), we are willing to risk an open door and an open heart. In a culture where we are told to look out for number one, we are willing to risk generosity toward those we don't even know and won't even know, in places all over the world we will never see with our own eyes.

That's our legacy, that's the kind of world we want for our children and our children's children and all God's children and it's the kind of church we are willing to give our best to be. We do it because it is the life that Jesus lives and we believe it is what Jesus asks of his followers.

How are you spending your life? To what are you giving? In what vision of the future are you willing to risk today's resources for tomorrow's fulfillment? That's what I believe Jesus asks us to ponder as we make our investment in the ministry and mission of Frog Pond/Meridian UCC in 2008.