

13 November 2022

As If We Had Nothing
1 Corinthians 7:29-31

Our scripture today comes from Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, chapter 7, verses 29-31:

²⁹I mean, brothers and sisters, the appointed time has grown short; from now on, let even those who have wives be as though they had none, ³⁰and those who mourn as though they were not mourning, and those who rejoice as though they were not rejoicing, and those who buy as though they had no possessions, ³¹and those who deal with the world as though they had no dealings with it. For the present form of this world is passing away.

It is that time again. Our committees have been considering our budget for next year. Pledge cards have been mailed to you. It's time again for me to preach about giving money.

Yeah, it's not exciting to me either. It isn't that I mind talking about money. To tell the truth, we don't do it enough. Jesus talked about money all the time. Money is part of our lives. Most of what we do involves money – jobs, bills, food, home, transportation, college, health care, retirement – so unless our faith is just a hobby, separate from our real lives, then we should talk regularly about living our faith in the world of earning and paying, buying and selling. So just talking about money isn't the problem. The problem is that when I preach about money at this time of year, you all know perfectly well that I have an ulterior motive: I'm asking for money to run the church. And then it probably occurs to you that I'm one of the primary beneficiaries of the money you give to the church. I'm paid a good salary, with pension and benefits, and that salary package constitutes about a quarter of the church budget. So when I preach about how you should give to the church, even if everything I say is true and biblical and reasonable, I still feel phony and self-serving.

And it doesn't help that there are so many who really *are* exactly that kind of phony – from the megachurch pastor who issued a special appeal to his congregation because he wanted an upgrade on his private jet or the other megachurch pastor who owns multiple homes – no, estates – which are regularly featured in national photo spreads (Lifestyles of the Rich and Shameless), to the televangelists who had gold plated potty fixtures in their home bathrooms. And no, I didn't make any of that up. I wish I had. By their rapacious, money-grubbing, shameless greed, people like that have tainted the whole idea of preaching about money.

Yeah, it's not my favorite sermon of the year. Let me see if I can do it with integrity.

Why should you give money to the church? Or – before that, even – why should Christians give money away to anyone? That's the real question, and the answer is that we should give our money to others for the same reason that we give them our time or our attention: because caring for the physical welfare of others is how Christ lived his life – and so should we. Following Christ cannot exist just in some sort of a removed “spiritual” part of our existence, because we were created to be both spiritual and physical beings. *We cannot live those two existences separately.* And, one more time, our physical lives operate largely by means of money, so our financial lives throughout the week must reflect our faith as much as what we do here on Sundays. Christ calls us to love our neighbors as ourselves, and if we interpret this to mean that we should have loving *feelings* for others while keeping all our financial resources for ourselves, we have missed a step. In the book of James, we read this: *If a brother or sister is naked and*

lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, 'Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill', and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? (James 2:15-16). Loving our neighbor needs to be both spiritual and physical. Being a follower of Christ means not spending all our money on ourselves but giving freely to those who need it. Being whole people following Christ demands that our financial lives reflect Christ's love.

This doesn't have to mean something radical. Most of us are not called to give up all possessions and live as hermits. Instead, we are called to a difficult middle way. I believe that God made us with that dual nature – spiritual beings with physical bodies – so that we could live in that tension. It's not supposed to be simple, and we are *supposed* to have to work at it. We are supposed to find creative ways to drag Christ into our unique worlds and figure out how to be a lawyer or clerk or bookkeeper or apartment manager or nurse who reflects Christ all the time.

This brings me to the curious passage we read from Paul, which offers us a unique perspective on the physical world. Paul says: Hey, it's all temporary. He says *the appointed time has grown short*, and adds *the present form of this world is passing away*. That being the case, live with that awareness. When you mourn in this world, mourn truly and genuinely, but with hope. The griefs of this world and our losses here are not to be compared to the joy to come. When we rejoice in this world, rejoice, but don't make too much of it. Every good thing here is just a foretaste of a greater joy. Paul even says *let even those who have wives be as though they had none*. Even our greatest blessings – our relationships of love and commitment – are temporary. Even as we cherish those we particularly love in this world, we are to live with the awareness that there is coming a time when we will love everyone that much. And then there's money. [Let] *those who buy [be] as though they had no possessions, and those who deal with the world as though they had no dealings with it*. Go ahead with your physical and financial lives. Work hard and earn your pay, pay your bills, purchase what you need, enjoy the material gifts of this world where you find them, but never forget that you are also a part of a world where all that is ultimately irrelevant.

Paul describes living simultaneously in two worlds – one temporary and one eternal. Don't get stuck in the temporary one, which consists of our jobs, our social roles, our politics, our possessions, even our families. Keep leaning forward to the eternal one, which is about loving God and others. Yes, we have to focus most of our time and attention on the physical world, but even then, the *way* we do it should point toward God. John Wesley gave this advice: "Earn all you can, save all you can, give all you can." There is nothing wrong with earning money. If you work hard, you should. But don't let your earnings control you. You are not how much money you make. You are a child of God. Second, live simply, saving what you can. Don't spend too much on luxury. Remember, we're passing through. We're just here for a while, heading somewhere much better. Don't get too comfortable in the transit lounge. And finally, give all you can. With the money we save, we should above all be showing love for God and others. That's why Christians give.

So just one more question. Why give to the church? You should give to the church if, and only if, the church is leaning into that eternal world by expressing love for God and others. Do not give just to keep the church's doors open. It is not the purpose of the church to survive. There are churches all over the world for whom that's all they have left and who ask for donations basically so that they can limp through another year without shutting their doors, churches whose focus is exclusively on themselves and who could disappear tomorrow and their absence would not be noticed by anyone in their community. If you conclude that we are one of

those churches, then for God's sake give your money to someone else, someone with promise. If all a church cares about is surviving, then it's time for that church to die.

But we are not that church. We define our purpose in what we call our Four Goals and Values: worshiping God, welcoming *everyone*, reaching out to others with compassion, and spiritual formation. And we try to live those purposes. I don't have time today to go through all the ways that we are making a difference in individual lives within our church and in Eau Claire, but our monthly newsletter, the *Circuit Rider*, is our monthly report card in each of our four major subjects. In the letter you got last week – you know, the one with the pledge card – you also got a pie chart showing how the budget of the church is allocated toward those Goals and Values. Again, I won't try to go through all of that this morning, but this I can tell you this: our purpose as a church is not just to survive, and if we disappeared tomorrow, Eau Claire would miss us.

We are not perfect. We are a physical institution with many of the problems that beset any institution, because we are made up of physical, material individuals like us, and we're in process. But as a church, we are leaning into a different reality, beyond this world, by putting love for God and others above our own comfort. As individuals, you do the same.