

“What is Required of You?”

II Samuel 7:1-11, 16; Luke 1:26-45

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From the Pulpit

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A sermon delivered by The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Pentecost 20, Proper 23, October 11, 2015 dedicated to my family & always to the glory of God!

“What is Required of You?”

Job 23:1-9, Hebrews 4:12-16; Mark 10:17-31

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

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Friends and admirers were backed up for almost a block outside the beautiful old church. People were standing three-deep in line waiting to pay their final respects to a man whom the whole town had come to love and admire. Some who were standing in the four inches of snow had never met the man. But he had touched their lives and they felt compelled to come and pay tribute to one who had virtually become the father of the whole community. During the long wait, people began to chat. The subject was always “Walter.”

“I only met him once but he changed my life forever,” said a young woman shivering from the cold. “You see, I came to this town with my husband and three children. I hadn’t been here but three weeks when my husband took off leaving me and the children alone. I was so scared I thought I would die. I didn’t have a lot of education and hadn’t planned to work until the children were older.”

“My neighbor heard about my problem and she called Walter. He didn’t even come over but sent word he had a job. I said he had a free apartment that I would keep us warm until I could get on my feet. It was four months before I could afford to pay any rent. The only time I met him was two years later when I went to make payment on my **back rent.**”

“Do you know what he said, “He just looked over his reading glasses and very quietly said, “*I never intended for you to pay for those months. You just go out there and find somebody in need and help them.*” So I did. I went straight to my pastor and asked if he could suggest somebody who needed help. It felt so good to give instead of receive that I just kept helping them. Walter taught me how to be a giver and how good it feels.”

The man standing behind her smiled and said, “That sounds like old Walt.” I’ll bet that everybody standing in line has the same kind of story to tell. I knew him for about

20 years and I'll have to say I never knew a more giving man."

An older man, perhaps in his late-80's, turned around to face the man and the woman. He said, "I couldn't help but overhear your story. Everyone standing out here in the snow has stories about Walt. That's for sure. We went to school together. We were best friends growing up. We even signed up to fight in World War II together, but then we got separated. When the war was over, he didn't come home right away. I tried to trace him but just when I was about to give up. Then one day, he got off the bus still wearing his uniform. He'd been captured in the Battle of the Bulge and had been a POW. He didn't say much. He was all skin and bones and looked worn down from his imprisonment.

"Some months later, Walter stood up in church one Sunday and asked if he could say a few words. The pastor never got to preach that day and no one cared. He told what he had been through in the war and as a POW and how he had come to discover that the only important thing in his life was God, his family, and helping other people. From that day on, he lived the way he thought Christ would live, if the Lord had been born rich. He said he knew he could never do it, but he would like to try to outgive God. *He said that giving was the best reason for living that he had*

come across.” (A story drawn from *Generous People*, E. Grimm, Abingdon Press, Nashville, 1992, pp.75-76).

Walter had discovered something as a young soldier and prisoner of war that not everybody figures out. He discovered that: **Giving is the reason for living.**

In a survey after survey, people say their primary reason for giving is gratitude to God for all the blessings they have received.

In a cartoon I came across years ago, a pastor is speaking to her congregation at the time of the annual stewardship campaign, *“I would like to remind you that what you are about to give is deductible, cannot be taken with you, and is considered by some to be the root of all evil”* (Ibid, p. 77). But as we all know, at the heart of our giving, we don’t give for tax deductions, because we can’t take with us or because we believe money is the root of all evil.

We give for at least seven good reasons:

1. (as already stated) We give as a grateful response to God.
2. We give because giving adds meaning to our lives.
3. We give because we like to help people.
4. We give because in giving we feel a heart of gratitude for God’s gift of salvation and healing in our lives.
5. We give because someone asked us to give.
6. We give to people we trust.

7. We give because we believe in the mission or ministry of the people or project to which we are giving.

So much more could be said about each one of these reasons for giving, but quite simply, they can be summed up by the story of Walter. **We give because giving is the reason for living.**

In today's Gospel lesson, Mark 10:17-31, a rich man visits Jesus with one **question of ultimate concern**, "What must I do to **INHERIT eternal life**?" He falls on his face before Jesus with an open heart having lived his life as a follower of all the laws of Moses. He has always tried to do the right thing. **But his greatest heart's desire** is the promise of eternity. With all sincerity, he asks Jesus how he can do that.

Mark says, "Jesus looked him straight in the eyes and Jesus loved him" (a phrase he only uses four times in his gospel). With his eyes looking into the rich **man's soul**, Jesus spoke. Jesus loved him so much, and saw that his request was so sincere and clear that he simply loved him. Jesus sees the goodness of this man. But he also sees what's missing in this rich **man's life**. So Jesus challenges the rich ruler to sell everything he has and give it all to the poor. The rich man cannot and will not do this. His face clouds over and walks away heartbroken. Unlike Walter, who gained eternal life

when he learned to share everything he had in his pursuit to “**outgive God,**” this man is righteous but still covetous of his money.

He (literally) walks away from the promises of God.

Another rich young ruler 13 centuries later (another soldier returning from war) read this story and it made a completely different choice. He chose to follow Jesus. That is why when I read this story images of a wealthy Francis of Assisi come to mind. Francis walked away from the wealth of his father and his family gave everything to the poor and embraced poverty. If we read what Francis wrote and watch what Francis did, we know that Francis gained joy for living, love of all creatures great and small, a discipleship which led others to Jesus and eternal life in God’s kingdom which has no end.

All this happened as a rich young man choosing to follow Jesus and give everything to those who had nothing. He walked away from the false and often presumptuous promises of money and into the true and eternal promises of God. He embraced Mark 10:17-31 and it changed his life forever. Maybe that is why St. Francis is our favorite saint **and we don’t even know the name of the young man in Mark.**

When Jesus calls on the rich man to share his wealth, he is calling him into a decision of the heart. It is not a legal

mandate. Jesus is not a tax collector. Jesus wants to see this man who has accumulated great financial resources to share his resources in an equally great way. Remember, **Giving is the reason for living.** Remember also that it is Jesus who is the greatest teacher of this truth.

He wants to know what is it that claims our highest loyalty and prevents us from following him without inhibition. Jesus is the one asking, *“What is it that is holding you back?”*

In the spirit of Jesus let me ask as well: what are you worried about in following Jesus? Are you worried about what it would do to your ambition, your job and your family? Are you worried about it might do to your reputation or your investments? Are you held back from following Jesus by your skepticism or cynicism? Do you have a self-possessing **“truer value”** that keeps you from giving as your reason for living?

Jesus is truly and absolutely concerned about our **“ultimate concern.”** In fact, he is SO concerned about ultimate concerns that when the rich ruler walks away, he turns to his disciples – looks right into their eyes - and continues this line of teaching. Puffed-up Peter and his gang of 11 are pretty sure they have the equation for eternal life all sown up! But when Jesus looks deeply into THEIR eyes and pursues this conversation about money he asks, *“Do you*

have any idea how hard it is for someone who has it all to enter the gates of heaven? . . . It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for the rich to enter God's kingdom!"

He sets his disciples on their heels with this comment. **Jesus' point is simple** - it is really, really, really hard to be rich and get into heaven. **Let's face it** – this passage leaves all of us feeling like we want to put our heads down, turn and walk away, too. We can feel defeated and deflated by the challenges of faith being put into action.

So what is really at issue here? What are we to do?

Each of us must answer these questions for ourselves. But, each of us answers them in relationship to one another. We never answer questions of ultimate concern in a vacuum – always in relationship to God and one another. I think the difference between the rich man (and the disciples) in this story and the story of Walter is that Walter faced the truth about life and death and eternity. Sitting in a cell without a number as a prisoner without an identity, Walter came to realize what really mattered – God, family and being generous in helping other people. Perhaps the rich man had not faced his maker like Walter had. Perhaps he had never dealt with his ultimate concern, just the ultimate question of his concern.

Whether you, like Walter, have looked death in the eyes or not, trust this because its source is tried and true:
Giving is the reason for living.

So...What is required of you?

What is required is that you live into the joyful fullness of giving. And when you do so, you will find heaven happening here and now as you grow in this Godly way and an eternity of joy awaiting you on down the road. Amen.

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