

A sermon delivered by the Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, senior minister at the First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, September 26, 2010, dedicated with love to Daniel Robert Sitler Ahrens on his 20th birthday, to everyone I met along my journey, and always to the glory of God!

“True Faith, True Riches”

**Jeremiah 32:1-3, 6-15;
I Timothy 6:6-19; Luke 16:19-31**

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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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Today’s scripture passages speak to us of buying and selling, the nature of material possessions and the value of true faith and true riches. Jeremiah speaks of buying land in a times of economic depression and war in act of faith and an investment in hope. I Timothy speaks of *greed* in the Christian community that leads people away from their faith and into the infliction of grief and pain. And Luke weaves a “can’t-take-it-with-you” tale concerning a rich man, a beggar and none other than Father Abraham.

Whoever said reentry into THIS pulpit would be easy doesn’t read their Bible and doesn’t follow the lectionary readings.

Let’s jump into Jeremiah, chapter 32. The year is 587 BCE. Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, has his armies laying siege to city of Jerusalem. The armies intend to starve all the city’s inhabitants and force corrupt King Zedekiah to surrender. Zedekiah calls upon his prophet Jeremiah to

pronounce a word of hope. After all, when Jeremiah proclaimed “hope” 10 years earlier, the Pharaoh’s army marched north out of Egypt and saved the day. This time, Jeremiah simply says, “You will not succeed.”

Not liking the prophet’s dire and direct words, Zedekiah puts Jeremiah in prison one last time. The king cries out, “Why?” He wants to know, “Why does Jeremiah say this? Why does the prophet threaten the king? Why are they being attacked?” If the king had been listening to the prophet, he would know the answer to all his “why” questions. His corruption has created his downfall. Now, only silence accompanies cries of whys!

While Jeremiah ignores the whining king, he listens to his poor cousin Hanamel, who begs Jeremiah to buy their family’s ancestral home and farm in Anathoth, a village just north of the Jerusalem wall. Today, Anathoth would be located on the high ground around The King David Hotel and the YMCA in center city Jerusalem (you couldn’t touch this land today on an imprisoned prophet’s salary!).

More “whys” cry out from the text – this time coming from all of us – the faithful listeners! We think there is absolutely no benefit to the imprisoned, soon to be deported (or possibly beheaded!) prophet so “Why Buy?” Moreover, why would anyone buy land in a time of economic depression and war? Why, when the city is soon to fall and Anathoth will be in the possession of the Babylonians, would Jeremiah buy his family’s plot?

While everyone is crying “why” around him, the famous prophet of doom says nothing. Instead, his actions become his answer. In other words, his actions speak louder than words.

Jeremiah simply weighs out the money – 17 shekels of silver. He clearly sets out the terms and conditions for purchase. He signs the deed. He seals it in the presence of

witnesses. Then, in the presence of Baruch, cousin Hamamel, and witnesses who sign the deed of purchase, in the presence of Judeans who can see, and hear, and smell, and taste the Babylonian assault on their future, Jeremiah seals the deal.

In the end, it is God who answers all the “whys” swirling around this text. Jeremiah 32:15 records, “The God-of-the-Angel-Armies, the God of Israel says, **‘Life is going to return to normal.’** Homes and fields, and vineyards are again going to be bought and sold in this country.” (Eugene Peterson’s *The Message*). The words, “bought again,” translated from the Hebrew mean the economy will “resume” and “regain it’s strength again.” Destruction and judgment are not God’s final word. Restoration, mercy, salvation and hope are God’s final words. Life returning to normal is the sign of God’s economy set in place.

By his prophetic actions, Jeremiah teaches us to live into the belief that, “If we have faith in God, all will be well.” He teaches us that true riches are discovered by faithful action. He teaches us that matching our investments in dreams coupled with our faith claims is the way to boldly buy into the future, even in the darkest times. In fact, it is exactly in the prophet and the nation’s darkest hour that faith and future development inspired by investments come together and find meaning. It is powerful to me that we know the specifics of land acquisition by reading the prophet’s words. Jeremiah 32 is a blueprint of how to complete a real estate deal 2,500 years ago.

In each generation, God blesses us with men and women whose prophetic faith claims match their economic investments in future hope!

The Bible’s brashness on themes of wealth and material possessions continues in Paul’s first letter to Timothy. Throughout the letter, the apostle has been laying boundaries around the Christian faith. He has been trying to give structure and form to how we live as Christians.

As his letter comes to the end, Paul focuses on the ultimate folly of collecting wealth. Aware that a growing number of Christians are hoarding the wealth that they accumulate, he writes to Timothy, “A devout life brings wealth, but it is the rich simplicity of being yourself before God. Since we entered the world penniless and will leave it penniless, if we have bread on the table and shoes on our feet, that’s enough.” (Peterson’s *The Message*) He continues, “List for money brings trouble and nothing but trouble. Going down that path some lose their footing of faith and live to regret it bitterly ever after.”

Paul implores Timothy to “Run for his life” away from attitudes that cling to money and lose track of righteousness and eternal life. Again, reading from Eugene Peterson’s *The Message*, Paul says to his friend Timothy, and each one of us, “Pursue a righteous life – a life of wonder, faith, love, steadiness, and courtesy. Run hard and fast into this faith. Seize the eternal life you were called to.” (I Timothy 6: 11-12).

Paul finishes his letter with a return to those Christians who have wealth (and judging what I have seen this summer in Spain, Morocco, Israel and especially Palestine and Egypt that would be all of us). He writes, “(My dear) Timothy, tell those rich in this world’s wealth to quit being so full of themselves and so obsessed with money, which is here today and gone tomorrow. Tell them to go after God who piles on all the riches we could ever manage – to do good, to be rich in helping others, to be extravagantly generous. If they do that, they will build a treasury that will last, gaining eternal life – life that is truly life.” (I Timothy 6:17-19)

Why can’t we get this? Why?

As I sat watching the sun set over the desert on my last night in Cairo, my new friend, Mohamed said to me, “Mr. Tim, can I ask you something that has been bothering me?”

“Of course, my friend,” I replied.

He continued, “What I don’t understand about American is your need to hoard your money. I run a business (a successful one I might add) and I am happy to make money, to care for my family, to give 10% of my earnings to the mosque and the poor (which is an expectation of all Muslims) and to be happy. Why do so many **Americans** I meet in my business dealings seem so unhappy with making money? Is it because they make it to bury it away? If they share it, they would be happier. Don’t you think? Doesn’t your Bible say anything about this? ”

The sincerity and clarity of my friend Mohamed’s questions came from the sincerity and clarity of his Islamic faith. He lives a faith that clearly spells out how much, how to and when to share wealth with others. What about us? We have the same essence to our faith! Five-hundred and fifty years before the Prophet Mohammed received his first revelation in 610 A.D., the Apostle Paul was writing Timothy from his prison cell about what really mattered in a faith that follows Jesus into eternal life. When will we get it?

The “When will we get it?” carries over into Luke’s Gospel parable about the rich man, Lazarus, and my favorite guy, Father Abraham! Lazarus never speaks in this story. As a poor man, he hovers under the table of “dives” or “the rich man.” While his best friends, the dogs, lick his open sores, Lazarus eats scraps tossed off the rich man’s table. He dies in this dreadful condition. He is carried into heaven by the angels and placed on the lap of Father Abraham.

Dives dies and goes to hell. From the torment of hell he sees Lazarus (probably for the first time!) sitting in heaven on the lap of Abraham. So, Dives calls out to Abraham to have mercy upon him. “Please, send Lazarus to me and let him cool my tongue from fires of torment with just a dip of water on his finger.”

Abraham kindly says, “You had your chance in life to make different choices. Now the chasm between heaven and hell is so great that no one can traverse it. Nor can anyone cross over from hell to heaven.”

So Dives changes his approach. Since he cannot be saved from eternal torment, he begs Father Abraham to send Lazarus back to warn his five brothers of their future fate. Abraham says, “They have Moses and the Prophets (like Jeremiah). Let them listen to the law of Moses and the prophets of God (and I would add Paul in his first letter to Timothy, chapter 6).”

Dives wisely responds, “They aren’t listening to the Word of God or his prophets! But, if someone came back from the dead, they would sit up and pay attention!” Looking with love at Lazarus, Abraham responds, “If they don’t listen to Moses and the prophets, they are not going to be convinced simply by someone rising from the dead!” End of story.

If we have been sleepwalking in matters of money and faith, compassion and serving others, the meaning of life and eternal life, our texts today wake us up to the meaning of true faith and true riches. They awaken us to several perspectives on this theme.

As I prepared for today’s sermon, I really wanted to share more about my three months of living, worshiping, and praying with Muslims, Jews, and Christians. I have way too much to share.

In God’s eternal wisdom, God made other plans today. I believe God entrusted these texts with this community of faith today as a wake-up call on our church’s 158th birthday. God is calling us to invest our lives and resources in the present and future ministry of this place through which God has blessed generations of faithful followers.

We all have lots of excuses as to why we wouldn’t stretch

ourselves in this time and place to invest in the present and future ministry and mission of First Church. I have heard most of the excuses. I have come up with some you never even thought of. But, then, I read the words of Jeremiah, Paul and Jesus. The word of God trumps the vanity of your pastor and all of us and the excuses vaporize all around us in this sanctuary.

I love to talk about the abolitionists of First Church. But will our children, and children down through the ages love to talk about us and about this time and what we did here? Our choices for our legacy have been painted with a large brush stroke across the canvas of today's biblical narratives.

This summer, I was blessed to travel to places most people only dream about. I had mountaintop experiences on the mountain where Moses received the Ten Commandments, walked Jesus' way of the cross (the Via Delarosa), visited Sarah and Abraham's tomb, traveled through deserts, was Pyramid gazing and much more.

I have been on many pathways along the way. But, the most significant pathway I walked was a small stretch of sidewalk – 213 feet x 70 feet now laid between the former Byers Lot and First Church. Nothing compared with the feeling I had last Monday morning when I walked from the former 414 East Broad to 444 East Broad. My joy was complete here on the corner of Broad and Cleveland. It is this narrow passage which brings hope to our future's broadening way.

I have witnessed many things in the past three months. I have seen Christian, Jewish and Islamic faith in all its glory and for its goriness. I have walked through the good, the bad, and the ugly sides of Abraham's children's expressions of faith.

I know more now than ever before that the world needs this church to be a shining witness for an inclusive, tolerant,

loving, grace-filled Christian faith in the heart of Columbus, Ohio. God needs us to be strong and growing. So please breath deeply the words of Jeremiah, Paul, and Jesus. And when you exhale, may you breathe out and share an extravagant generosity and a vibrant response of faith you never imagined possible. Amen.

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