

A sermon delivered by the Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, senior minister at the First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Pentecost 19, October 11, 2009, dedicated to Donna Vogt, Brady McCabe and Aarav Peter, who have been born since August 8, and always to the glory of God!

“What’s There? What’s Missing?”

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 mid-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 skin and bones and looked worn down from his imprisonment.

“Some months later, he 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 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*, Eugene 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 that I saw some time ago, a pastor is speaking to his congregation at the time of the offering, “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. 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 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 lots of questions about how to receive eternal life. He approaches Jesus with an open heart having lived his life as a follower of all the laws of Moses. He has tried to do the right thing. But he desires the promise of eternity. With all sincerity, he asks Jesus how he can do that. Jesus loves this man, we are told. One can only guess that Jesus sees his request as sincere and clear. Jesus sees what's there. But he also sees what's missing.

Unlike Walter, who gained eternal life when he learned to share his wealth, this man is righteous but still covetous of his money. He is saddened when Jesus tells him to give away all he has and follow him. He (literally) walks away from the promises of God.

Images of a wealthy Francis of Assisi facing this same decision come to mind. In the late 13th century, Francis walked away from wealth and embraced poverty. He read this story in Mark's gospel and actually made a choice to follow Jesus Christ. 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 man choosing to follow Jesus and give everything to those who had nothing. He walked into the promises of God.

Jesus calls on this rich man to share his wealth. This is a decision of the heart. It is not a legal mandate of 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.

In essence, Jesus is concerned about our "ultimate concern." He wants to know what is it that claims our highest loyalty and prevents us from following him without inhibition. He's the one asking, "What is it that is holding you back?" Are you worried about what following

Jesus would do to your ambition, your job, 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?

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 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 helping other people. Perhaps the rich man had not faced his maker like Walter had. Perhaps he not dealt with his ultimate concern, just the ultimate question of 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 there AND what is missing from your life? Take a look. Make a decision. Live fully into God’s call for your life. Amen.