

October 26, 2008 Sermon

In the last half of the 1600's life was good in Holland. Instead of spending money on invading other countries, like their neighbors in France, England, Portugal and Spain were doing, the Dutch were investing resources in their economy. The middle merchant class was large, growing and prosperous. And a new upper class of rich merchants and traders seemed to have unlimited money. They also had a new hobby – tulips and the bulbs that grow them.

Uncontrolled speculation in tulip bulbs began after the owner of the only 12 known specimens of the Semper Augustus tulip bulbs refused to sell them for a price that exceeded \$300,000. From that point on the weekly bulb auctions were out of control. Prices continued to climb, and one commentator noted that it seemed a dumber, richer fool showed up every week at the auction to push prices higher and higher. The peak came when a family of 5 orphans sold a lot of 8 bulbs for the equivalent of several hundred thousand dollars. The next week, the dumber, richer fool failed to show up at the auction. Prices tumbled from tens of thousands of dollars for a single bulb, to one or two dollars.

The more things change, the more they stay the same. Let's listen to the word of God.

Scripture Reading

Luke 12:16-21; 29-34 (The Message)

16-19 Then he told them this story: "The farm of a certain rich man produced a terrific crop. He talked to himself: 'What can I do? My barn isn't big enough for this harvest.' Then he said, 'Here's what I'll do: I'll tear down my barns and build bigger ones. Then I'll gather in all my grain and goods, and I'll say to myself, Self, you've done well! You've got it made and can now retire. Take it easy and have the time of your life!'

20 "Just then God showed up and said, 'Fool! Tonight you die. And your barnful of goods—who gets it?'

21 "That's what happens when you fill your barn with Self and not with God."

29-32 "What I'm trying to do here is get you to relax, not be so preoccupied with getting so you can respond to God's giving. People who don't know God and the way he works fuss over these things, but you know both God and how he works. Steep yourself in God-reality, God-initiative, God-provisions. You'll find all your everyday human concerns will be met. Don't be afraid of missing out. You're my dearest friends! The Father wants to give you the very kingdom itself.

33-34 "Be generous. Give to the poor. Get yourselves a bank that can't go bankrupt, a bank in heaven far from bankrobbers, safe from embezzlers, a bank you can bank on. It's obvious, isn't it? The place where your treasure is, is the place you will most want to be, and end up being.

“Now the grass withers and the flowers fade, but the word of our God stands forever.”

The grass withers, the flowers fade and the value of our tulip bulbs – oops I mean our retirement accounts – comes crashing back to earth.

We’ve heard a lot of talk lately about living in “interesting” times. And we do. These are times that make us take (pardon the word) stock of our lives, re-evaluate our priorities. Steve Banks mentioned to me that he had an appointment with his retirement account advisor coming up. Rather than meeting with him he felt like just sending him a note saying “Fix it”.

But it’s not that easy. You know we’re heading into Stewardship Season. Our Financial Administrator Laura Winberg and I on Friday attended a Stewardship Seminar at St. Andrews UMC in Highlands Ranch. I had to laugh – several of the people attended were gloating about how lucky they felt that they had done their Stewardship Campaigns before the big market drop, and noting how good their timing was.

But they have it wrong – they’re missing the point. Stewardship ISN’T about raising money for the church. It’s about considering the ultimate source of all good things. It’s about acknowledging our blessings. It’s about managing our resources in a thoughtful and Christ-like manner.

I think they might miss the point again when they use the scripture Gary/Julie just read simply to raise money. They miss the point – and we can all miss the point – this parable is about our relationship with God, not our relationship with our checkbook or financial statements. It’s about examining our priorities.

When we’re looking at the parables and teachings of Jesus, I think it’s always helpful to have some context, to understand Jesus’ audience, what he was saying that spoke to their situation, and how those lessons can speak to our situations. When we do that with this passage, I think we can find several points that will speak to us today, not only as individuals, but in our lives together as the Lakewood United Methodist Church.

First of all let me say, this passage is NOT a divine death threat. God is not saying that if you make mistakes with money, if you fail to acknowledge the source of your blessing, if you live a life of self-dependence that fails to acknowledge God’s blessings, that God will curse you or kill you.

Instead, Jesus here is describing a man who is doing the right things. He’s laboring, and being productive. He’s being frugal. He’s shrewdly planning ahead. He appears to be dealing with the reality that was an agrarian life in ancient Israel.

You see, famine was a potential reality in those times. We first hear about a famine in the bible in Genesis when we read the story of Joseph. After being sold into slavery in Egypt

by his brothers, he rises to prominence and becomes their salvation by making grain available to them in the time of a huge famine in Israel. His Father, Jacob, and his brothers had LOTS of money, but their money was meaningless. There was no grain to be had at any price in Israel.

Famines weren't uncommon in accounts of ancient Israel. So the rich farmer in the parable Gary/Julie read to us WAS doing the right things. But he was doing the right things for the wrong reasons.

I have a love/hate relationship with The Message version of the Bible that Gary/Julie read this parable from. I think that sometimes in the effort to give us modern language, the Message can miss some of the finer points. But I love how it phrases the rich farmer's conversation with himself as he's justifying and rationalizing his plans.

“Then I'll gather in all my grain and goods, and I'll say to myself, Self, you've done well! You've got it made and can now retire. Take it easy and have the time of your life!”

He wasn't storing up grain to prepare himself or his family for a famine. He was storing up wealth for his ego. To indulge himself. And not to honor God. The parable ends with his life ending that very evening. He didn't die because of his mistake. But that mistake in thinking prevented him from living his life fully, from aligning with God's purposes. It prevented him from using his blessings to be a blessing to others.

As Jesus is explaining this parable to his disciples a little later on, he sums up the point. “Life is more than food just as the body is more than clothing.” God is calling us to move beyond appearances, beyond superficial things. God is calling us to do the right things for the right reason.

There was a popular book several years ago called the Millionaire Next Door, authored by Thomas Stanley and William Danko. The premise of the book is that there are 3.5 households with a net worth of over one million dollars in America, one in every 30 households is worth in excess of a million dollars, comprised mainly of home equity and retirement investments. (Okay, there may be a few hundred thousand less this month than there were last month). But the authors point out that these millionaires, the millionaires next door (and dare I say the millionaires sitting down the row or across the aisle from you) do not behave like Donald Trump. Their children don't act like Paris Hilton. They drive Toyotas and Buicks, not Rolls Royces. They live in typical suburban houses, like the ones next door to you and I. In fact, the millionaire next door may be you or I. Well, let me rephrase that – it may be YOU.

The point of the book, which is not a religious book, is that we're blessed to live in a country where often (and be clear – I don't say always) hard work at normal jobs coupled with reasonable expectations and living a reasonable standard of life is the road to the true American dream. A dream of home ownership, college educated children and a comfortable retirement.

But then they get personal. The book notes that the millionaire next door doesn't typically own a second home. Doesn't take around the world cruises. They don't send their children off to exclusive prep schools back east. It notes that the millionaire next door is much more likely to wear a Timex than a Rolex, but quickly points out that they're smart enough to buy a Rolex, which at least will hold its value, instead of spending \$500 on a Raymond Weil watch which will soon be worthless, just in the hopes of impressing someone.

I bought this Raymond Weil watch about 15 years ago.

Now my exact thought processes at the time remain a little fuzzy. I sure couldn't afford a Rolex. But at the time, if I could have, I think I would have. I wanted a watch that was "NICE". Nicer than say a \$35 Timex or a \$75 Bulova or a \$100 Seiko.

And in my defense, it has performed perfectly for a decade and a half. Other than a battery change every couple of years for say \$40 (it costs more to change the battery after all because it's a Raymond Weil watch) it's been flawless.

Just like the \$35 Timex or the \$100 Seiko would have been. Now just in case I impressed anyone out there by pointing out my Raymond Weil watch, which I think cost about \$500 at the time, let me be clear – it's probably worth about \$50 now – hardly worth a mugging, and barely worth the \$40 battery I recently had to put in it.

Buying a watch is a fine thing. You need it to be on time (I noticed a few of you this morning must be needing new watches). But buying a watch to impress is foolhardy. Just as storing up grain or money or possessions to impress and give ourselves a false sense of security is wrong. Doing the right things, for the wrong reasons, can never operate to our long term benefit.

The second point I think being made here is when we do the right things, for the right reasons, we end up in the right place. The reading this morning ends on a pretty well known line from the scripture (if sort of in a "Message" adaptation). We probably most commonly hear it being phrased "Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."

One of the things I am always amazed about the Bible is how a book written thousands of years ago, without the benefit of modern psychoanalytic studies or nature vs. nurture sociological and behavioral knowledge can just nail human nature to the tee. Let's listen again to the end of the reading as we heard it from the Message:

It's obvious, isn't it? The place where your treasure is, is the place you will most want to be, and end up being.

I think Jesus here is just dealing with a reality of human nature. Our attention, our efforts, our time are spent largely where we want to spend them. Where our TREASURE is, there

our heart will be also. So Jesus, with that reality, admonishes us to focus our attention and our efforts – our HEARTS on heavenly things.

That's the purpose of good Stewardship education and Stewardship campaigns. You've heard Melanie say numerous times we ask you to give not because the church needs the money (although in our post-sermon report back to Melanie I want everyone to make it clear that I did NOT say the church doesn't need money). We talk to you about giving because you have a need to give. That's what Jesus is saying here. To live a complete life you must acknowledge the source of your blessings and devote not only your finances but your life in helping God achieve God's purposes in this world. The Kingdom of Heaven is built with the hearts and actions of God's children in this world. Writing a check is just the easy part. But make no mistake, it is a part.

Christian author Chuck Swindoll was quoted several years back paraphrasing these verses. He in essence said, let me look at your check book register and I can tell you where your heart is. That may not be technologically up to date any more. Now maybe you need to examine your check book register and your debit card record, and your online purchase log, your automatic drafts and your Blackberry or Daytimer day planning records to find out where your heart is. But I don't think you need to go to all of that trouble.

We know where our heart is – we know where our treasure is. All of us may not want to admit it, but we know. Are we chasing after bigger houses, more toys – nicer Raymond Weil watches? Or are we doing the things that help advance the kingdom of God. Are we loving and supporting our family, helping neighbors in need, supporting this church with our prayers, our presence, our gifts, our service and our witness? I hope we all take the time to answer those questions in the coming weeks.

I want to close with a final point on this topic. When we do the right things, for the right reasons, we are in the right place. That is the place is where God can use us to impact the world in incredible ways.

I'm not talking simply about a physical location. Are our lives and our circumstances, both personal and as a church, ready to respond to the call of God? Because God can use us in incredible ways in whatever the coming days might hold, if we are ready and willing.

I just can't manage to get depressed about the future of this church or the Christian church in general if in fact we're sailing headlong into financial crisis or political crisis or any other so-called crisis that we'll face. God uses our church and all churches, and God's followers here and around the world to be his hands and feet in times like this, in times that may come.

I've said before that one of the many reasons I'm a United Methodist, is because the United Methodist Church is a denomination that doesn't ask us to check our brains at the

door. We're not asked to choose between science and faith, between spirituality and education, between our personal life experience and our doctrine. And that very reality is the key to our denomination's future survival (and even thriving) and that of Lakewood United Methodist Church.

Many of you have read the Adam Hamilton book Seeing Gray in a World of Black and White. The Men's breakfast group is currently studying it, we held a series of classes on it this Fall and Melanie has referenced it several times in sermons. Adam Hamilton's premise in the book is that main-line protestantism, and in particular the United Methodist Church, are in the best position to reach a younger generation who have been turned off and away from church by a closed minded, there is only black and white attitude.

Part of what tomorrow's church members want is a church that offers spiritual answers, that unashamedly witnesses for Jesus Christ and his gospel in a confused world. But they also want a church that responds to needs and meets people where they are. And we're in a position to do that better than any.

You may have noticed some changes this Fall in worship, in classes, in Sunday school. We launched a new Wednesday Night Together programming which includes dinner and a variety of classes, and it's been very well received.

We're undertaking this month a new marketing campaign aimed at an unchurched population entitled "If you come back to church, we promise not to throw the book at you." We have extras of the mailing piece available for you to take at the Welcome Desk, and I urge you to take some and mail them to friends, family and neighbors who may have been turned off by church.

As a church we're constantly undertaking new programs and evaluating old ones. As staff and lay leadership here we're doing all we can to live into our mission statement to Invite all in need of God's Love, Inspire them to become deeply committed Christians, and Involve them in service to a world in need.

I took the title for this sermon from another part of scripture that wasn't a part of this morning's reading. It comes from the book of Esther, chapter 4. Esther was a Jew who had risen in Persian society, and ended up marrying King Ahasuerus and becoming a queen. Through some evil advisors the king proclaimed a policy of killing all the Jews in the kingdom, not realizing his own wife Esther, was a Jew. Esther's uncle, Mordecai demanded that she reveal herself as a Jew and persuade her husband to remand the orders to execute the Jewish population. Esther hesitates, fearing for her own safety and that of her children.

Mordecai's argument is both powerful and timeless. **"Do not think that because you are in the king's house you alone of all the Jews will escape. 14 For if you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance for the Jews will arise from another place,**

but you and your father's family will perish. And who knows but that you have come to royal position for such a time as this?"

I really feel that God has brought THIS church to a place for such a time as this. Will we be ready to respond? Can we provide the assistance, can we help people with food, provide job placement and housing assistance, financial advice and training. Will our doors be open to those seeking something more than tulip bulbs and Raymond Weil watches?

This church has gone through an incredible process over the last several years. A process that called us to discern our values and our vision. We've met with leadership from many churches over the last several months, in relation to our relocation and because other churches just want to talk about our process and our plans.

And the most common comment we hear is, your church has discussed and voted on the issues we're afraid to even bring up for discussion.

You see, they're in an okay place by and large. The bills are mostly being paid. The heat and lights stay on. They pay some of their denominational apportionments, and no one from United Methodist headquarters complains much about what they don't pay.

I can take you to dozens of United Methodist churches in Denver alone that fit that bill. But this church has said that's not good enough. God does not call us to survive just a little bit longer, and then die a quiet, comfortable death with barely a whimper. God calls us to grow, to change, to do those things that will reach a new generation for his kingdom

Over the next 4 weeks our Stewardship Campaign will be underway. But you won't hear sermons from Melanie about money, about giving more, and how badly the church needs it. Instead you'll hear about how this church is striving to boldly do the will of God, to grow, to serve, to worship and witness, for such a time as this!