

“Being rich toward God”
Knowing the blessings of a generous spirit

November 26, 2006

Text: 1 Timothy 6:17-19, Luke 12:13-22

I.

I love the popular book of almost ten years back, *Tuesdays with Morrie*, by Mitch Albom. Morrie is a retired sociology professor at **Brandeis University** and, as it turns out, is dying of *Lou Gehrig’s* disease. Some twenty years before, Albom had been one of Morrie’s students.

The book is a series of conversations—on *Tuesdays*—between author, Mitch Albom and Morrie ... thus the title of the book, *Tuesdays with Morrie*. On the *eighth Tuesday*, Mitch arrives at Morrie’s for their weekly conversation holding up a newspaper headline for Morrie to see.

The newspaper reads: **I don’t want my tombstone to read, I never owned a network ...** as in TV network.

The quote was from **Ted Turner**, the billionaire media mogul, founder of CNN, who had been lamenting his inability to snatch up the CBS network in a corporate mega deal.

I don’t want my tombstone to read, I never owned a network. Can you believe that? Who can relate to that?

As a biblical counterpoint to this sort of restlessness and greed, the overwhelming message this morning from Luke’s gospel is: **at the end of the day, when all is said and done, our lives are NOT about our possessions.**

We know that, don’t we? If we were writing an essay in a course on *Spirituality and a Closer Walk with God*, we wouldn’t devote much time writing, or boasting, about our possessions, would we? ... about our cars and houses ... our vacations spots ... or all the impressive people we know. We know that all of this is nothing more than *fluff*, don’t we? It’s fluff ... meaningless in the grand scheme of things.

We know that authentic *spirituality* doesn’t care about *symbols of status* and *prestige* and *pecking order*, and all this worldly stuff that captures our fancy.

II.

Back to *Tuesdays with Morrie*, Mitch Albom says he brought the article for their Tuesday conversation because when he saw it, he couldn’t help but wonder ... *if Ted*

Turner ever found himself in Morrie's position—his breath disappearing, his body turning to stone, his days being crossed off the calendar one by one—would he really be crying over owning a network?

When he saw the headline, **Morrie** just sort of shook his head, commenting: *It's all a part of the same problem, Mitch; we put our values in the wrong things. And it leads to very disillusioned lives.*

And he went on to reflect on how people are forever looking for what they most cherish in life—love, attention, affirmation—but they're looking in the wrong places.

Later, **Morrie** added, *Money is never a substitute for tenderness ... and power is not a substitute for tenderness. As I sit here dying, I can tell you: when you most need it, neither money nor power will give you the feeling you're looking for, no matter how much of them you have.*

III.

Next Sunday is **Stewardship Sunday** in our church. It's the Sunday when we bring forth our respective pledges ... our financial commitments that we offer up to God in our heartfelt support of God's church.

Invariably, at some point, **Stewardship** talk comes down to money. We can talk about our gifts of time and talent—and these gifts are always important—but it's talk about money that makes us the most nervous and uneasy.

For years, psychiatrists and clinical psychologists have been telling us that it's the MONEY aspect of their lives that *troubled patients* are most reluctant to talk about. They are willing to bare their souls about their *work-life*, about their *home-life*, about their *intimate-life* ... their *leisure-life*, *economic-life* and on and on.

But for some reason, their *money-life* is the last secret to unfold, the most painful to reveal.

What is it about our associations with money? Why does this remain such a stumbling block? Somehow, it goes deep, doesn't it? And all sorts of *identity-related* issues come storming upon us related to self-esteem ... dignity ... pride.

But, hey, this is nothing new. The Bible knows. In the gospel accounts, Jesus talks more about money than any other topic except the Kingdom of God. Again, Jesus knows.

IV.

The context for Jesus telling the parable of the rich fool is that a man (presumably a young man) has just urged Jesus to ... *tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me*. Right away, Jesus detects some greedy impulses lying beneath the surface.

And he says, *Take care and be on your guard against all kinds of greed ... for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.*

In our consumer-crazed American culture, we hear this on multiple levels, don't we? But do we really hear it? As a culture, we're impressed with possessions. But there's an enduring paradox here for us, isn't there?

If you were to ask any of us, outside of God and our *Christian faith*, what's the most important thing in our lives, without blinking an eye we'd say our family and friends.

Still, at the same time, we're impressed with possessions and with certain elements of status, position and prestige that possessions suggest. And thus to all of us, this morning, Jesus says—straight away—one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.

According to one of **Ernest Hemingway's** biographers, on the first day of each new year Hemingway would give away some of his most treasured possessions. When people asked him about it ... *why he did this?* ... he answered,

***If I can give them away, then I own them.
But if I can't give them away, then they own me.***

V.

The problem with the rich fool in the parable is that the *rich fool* loses sight of the BIG PICTURE of his life.

- He loses sight of how fragile and fleeting life is.
- He loses sight of life's deeper obligations and commitments.

Clearly, in contrast to Ernest Hemingway, for example, his possessions own him.

He thinks that more crops and bigger barns and, therefore, greater profits are where it's at in life. It's like folks that, all the time, are aiming towards *early retirement*. I mean *early ... as in their forties or early fifties*. But they talk about it as if that would mean they'd somehow *made it*.

Making it, apparently, has everything to do with money ... with how much income ... how much control ... how much power to determine *what* we want to do and *where* and *with whom* we want to do it. Being in charge. Controlling our own destiny. Apparently, that's *making it*.

Just like the rich fool who, reflecting on his plans for expansion, boasts: *then I'll have ample goods stored up for many years ... and I'll be able to really kick back, eat, drink and enjoy the good life.*

Isn't this how many of us think of retirement? It's that not-too-far off day when somehow, magically, we're going to do all the things we always wanted to do. It's the wondrous day when everything's going to fall into place.

We'll have plenty of everything: financial resources, good health, family and friends all about, all of our favorite things to do.

Well, maybe this will actually happen for us. But the point is ...

- Is that really what our lives are about?
- Is that the purpose of our living? To be able to *kick back, eat, drink and enjoy the good life?*

VI.

Our parable suggests that the *good life* starts with honoring our deeper obligations by living lives that are *rich towards God*. When our lives are *rich towards God*, over time, things fall into place for us. Because it is then that the richness of God's gifts come alive in our spirit.

When we're *rich toward God* we feel it in the core of our being. There's a warmth that fills our spirit from within.

As *Tuesdays with Morrie* says, *money and power are no substitutes for tenderness.*

Morrie's spirit would have resonated well with our reading from **1 Timothy**, where we're exhorted to:

*Do good, be rich in good works, be generous and ready to share ...
and in this way storing up for ourselves a good foundation for the
future, so that we may take hold of the life that really is life.*

About money and possessions and the illusion of the *good life*, Morrie, who knows he is dying, said ...

If you're trying to show off for people at the top, forget it. They will look down on you anyhow. And if you're trying to show off for people at the bottom, forget it, too. They will only envy you. It's not about status.

It's about giving ourselves to other people. That's what makes us feel alive. Then, later, at the end of the Tuesday conversation, Morrie mused:

This Ted Turner guy ... he couldn't think of anything else for his tombstone?

VII.

From a biblical point of view, the KEY to *the good life* echoes 1 Timothy's counsel:

- Do good ... be rich in good works ...
- be generous and, all the time, be ready to share.

Because it is then, adds Timothy, that we build a foundation for the future so we can ... **take hold of the life that really is life.**

Taking hold of the life that really is life is what our lives are about, friends, as Christians. Each of us has been baptized into the *body of Christ* that is the Church. In our baptism, we're called apart from the world so that we might go back into the world ... in a sense, *reborn* and *redirected* ...to be God's presence in the world.

Next Sunday, we're invited to bring forth our financial pledges and commitments to our church for the year that lies ahead. We have much to look forward to and—always—much to do as believers in the Christian way.

- Trying to draw people in ...
- trying to meet people's diverse spiritual needs ... being a caring, nurturing, supportive community ...
- trying to reach out on issues of social justice and peace.

You're a richly blessed people ... generous in spirit and good-hearted again and again. In the midst of all our abundance and all our goodness, let us be challenged by the spirit to ***take hold of the life that really is life*** ... and be generous towards God.

All praise be unto God! Amen!

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