

SERMON DELIVERED AT AUBURN UMC, AUBURN, MICHIGAN

20th Sunday after Pentecost
Year B

Duane M. Harris

October 11, 2015

Text: 1 Kings 3:3-14

Title: “Wesley’s Simple Rules for Money: More Money; More Wisdom”

There can be no denying that in our culture there is a great emphasis on money as a thing of great value. In a capitalist society like ours, money is so often a preoccupation for people. We work for it, want more of it, and sometimes our dreams are driven by a yearning for more of it. Sometimes--maybe often--some think that just a little more would solve all their problems. Many go to school in order to enter a career that leads to a more lucrative career that promises higher financial rewards. Money is a key component in all our lives.

This has been true, of course, since human beings first began bartering. During John Wesley’s life in England, as a priest in the Church of England in the 18th century, he found himself preaching in the fields as he took the Good News of God’s love for all people to the people themselves. He had a passionate concern for working class people, and his ministry to them eventually evolved into the Methodist Church. He began noticing that those to whom he had been preaching and teaching and organizing into small groups he called “classes, those who had been hearing the message of the Gospel leading to the cleaning up of their lives; these folks began accumulating wealth. The Methodists were rising to the middle class in English society due to a period of economic growth and the influence of people adhering to the Methodist message of thrift, hard work and sobriety.

In 1744, Wesley decided that this accumulation of wealth warranted attention. As always, Wesley was concerned about social responsibility: loving God and neighbor not just in words but also in deeds. In particular, he was concerned that loving neighbor had to do with the way in which people dealt with their money. He wrote and preached a sermon he titled “On the Use of Money”. It arose out of a pastor’s heart, out of concern for people. In it he begins by affirming the use of money as “an excellent branch of Christian wisdom” that was “a subject largely spoken of, after their manner, by men of the world; but not sufficiently considered by those whom God hath chosen out of the world,” (Earn, Save, Give, p.12), meaning the church. He went on to define basic practices regarding money that are just as practical today as they were then: “Having, First, gained all you can, and Secondly, saved all you can, Then give all you can” (ibid.). In modern language Wesley’s rules for the use of money were: “Earn all you can. Save all you can. Give all you can.” In the next three weeks, we will explore each of these rules, and if you decide to join one of the classes, each will be exploring the themes in more depth. You will also find an insert in your bulletin each week that provides scripture and questions for

reflection on that week's theme.

Let's begin this morning by pondering if you could ask God for anything, knowing with 100% certainty that you would receive it, what would you ask for? It's the question the proverbial genie asks after the lamp has been rubbed: one wish--anything you want. What is it you would ask of God? Anything you want!

Chances are some—maybe most—would want more money. Others might choose—depending on your passions--faster cars, a bigger house, more modern gadgets, or anything else that's peddled on television screens or the internet. Then again, maybe you want something different like good health, good friends, good looks, or a better job, a long, prosperous, healthy life, maybe inner peace. The possibilities are almost endless!

If you could ask God for anything what would it be?

That's the question posed to Solomon in 1 Kings. God offers this young man who has been launched into serving as king of Israel whatever he wanted. Solomon could have asked for world domination, the most powerful military force in the world. He could have asked for wealth the likes of which the world had never seen, a debt free life, a palace in every port. He could have asked God for a family or friendships he could count on no matter what. He could have asked for a long and happy life. In short, Solomon could have asked God for that which made him comfortable and secure, for that which took care of him, focused on him, elevated him.

But Solomon's reply to God's generous question begins with gratitude, thanking God for God's steadfast love, rehearsing God's faithfulness to his father David, and stating the continuation of that love and faithfulness to Solomon, David's son, as the new ruler. In humility, Solomon then confesses that he sees himself as a child shrinking before the daunting task of ruling over people: "I do not know how to go out or come in," he tells God. "I don't know how to do this."

Solomon doesn't rehearse all the possibilities before him. That is, he doesn't draw up a laundry list of that which he might ask of God. Instead, he reminds God—and himself—of God's gracious love and faithfulness, and he recognizes that above all things he needs God's help in order to live the life before him. So instead of asking for all the money needed to solve all his problems, Solomon takes a far different tack as he tells God,

"Give your servant therefore an understanding mind to govern your people, able to discern between good and evil...."

Some translations read "understanding heart". The book of Proverbs calls it wisdom. Proverbs 4:7 makes it clear: "Get wisdom! Get understanding before anything else!" The two verses from Proverbs on your bulletin insert also proclaim Solomon's valuing of wisdom above all else that God could give:

Happy are those who find wisdom,
and those who get understanding,
for her income is better than silver,

and her revenue better than gold.
Proverbs 3:13-14 (NRSV)

Yesterday I met Jim here at the Health Fair. He works for A&D Home Health Care and he was at their table along with Laura Jesse sharing with anyone who would listen about the services they provide. I met Jim at the table. Laura introduced me to him as she checked my blood pressure, pulse and oxygen level. We didn't talk much at the table, but as I was getting ready to leave, Jim was headed out to his car for something and we began chatting. He said he was a pastor in a non-denominational church and that he had a cabin up by Loomis. He said he has befriended a lot of Amish people in the area of his cabin, that he relishes the opportunities he has to learn about and work to understand the differences between various religious expressions. He finds meaning and joy in listening to people as he tries to understand the differences among us.

I told him that years ago, my wife Lynn had arranged for a group of young adults from the church we were serving at the time to have dinner in an Amish home in the Clare area. The evening format was to have a traditional Amish chicken dinner in their home and then the tables would be cleared and put away, so we could sit in a circle and ask questions of the family. I was really excited about this, because I had some questions I wanted to ask. I wanted to know why they rejected the use of electricity and automobiles and so on. I was sincerely interested in knowing the theology behind their simple lifestyle and hoping to hear something from which I could learn.

We arrived as planned, had a wonderful dinner as planned. The tables were cleared and put away, the circle of chairs set up and there we sat, the man of the house ready to receive questions while the women tended to doing the dishes. I was eager and launched my question expecting a lengthy, thoughtful response. What I heard was, "Well, it's because that's the way we've always done it." That was it. I told Jim yesterday how disappointed I was with that answer. I expected more.

He told me that the person was probably not an elder and that if he had been he would have told me that the reason they live such a simple lifestyle is because they want to avoid the kinds of temptations that come with wealth. They don't use electricity because they don't want to owe anyone anything—ever. So they cannot owe an electrical company anything because it means then that someone has some power over you—punn intended. Whenever you owe someone, that person has some power over you. They don't own cars because of the way in which people often use them as status symbols. "My car is nicer than your car." They want to avoid those kinds of temptations, he said, because they smack of human pride. Living simply, without any debts, is about avoiding the kinds of temptations that wealth brings.

I asked him how he came to know this about them, and he told me that the Amish are his neighbors and he has established a relationship with them. He described an experience in which he invited them over to his place where they talked for hours on end as he listened to them, tried to understand them. After the conversation was over, several of the men split four cords of wood for him. He asked them how much he owed them. They said "Nothing." He protested, but they told him—if I'm remembering this correctly, "No, you have given us something by listening to us and trying to understand us. That is our payment." Jim finished the story by rubbing his fingers together and saying, "To them it's not about money. Money is not as valuable as relationships."

The Bible is so very clear that there is a spiritual element in our relationship with money and possessions. If we are not careful, our relationship with money and possessions can supersede our relationship with God and our neighbors. In Matthew's Gospel, Jesus expressed it this way: "No one can serve two masters.... You cannot serve God and wealth" (Matthew 6:24). Paul expressly told Timothy, "Some have wandered away from the faith and have impaled themselves with a lot of pain because they made money their goal" (1 Timothy 6:10).

Paul's description reminded me of a TIME Magazine article about 10 people who won it big in the lottery. The article shared how much each person had won and then the tragic consequences after winning it. It was really about how everybody dreams of winning money, but people often don't realize the nightmares that can come out of the woodwork, or the problems that result from such a windfall. I won't share all the stories. Just one.

Billie Bob Harrell, Jr. was 47 years old when he won \$31 million in the Texas Lotto jackpot in June of 1997. He was a guy who was constantly moving between low-paying jobs, a wife and three children to support. When he received his first \$1.24 million annual payout, it was great, joyful! He quit his job at Home Depot. According to the article, "took his family to Hawaii, donated tens of thousands of dollars to his church, bought cars and houses for friends and family, and even donated 480 turkeys to the poor. But his lavish spending attracted unwanted attention, and he had to change his phone number several times after strangers called to demand donations. He also made a bad deal with a company that gives lottery winners lump-sum payments in exchange for their annual checks that left him with far less than what he had won. When Harrell and his wife Barbara Jean separated less than a year later, it was the straw that broke the camel's back. His son found him dead inside his home from a self-inflicted gunshot wound on May 22, 1999, shortly before he was set to have dinner with his ex-wife. While family members disputed the idea that Harrell could have committed suicide, he clearly wasn't happy with his life; he'd told a financial adviser shortly before his death that 'Winning the lottery is the worst thing that ever happened to me'"

<http://newsfeed.time.com/2012/11/28/500-million-powerball-jackpot-the-tragic-stories-of-the-lotterys-unluckiest-winners/>).

The other stories shared similar sentiments about winning it big. Of course, there are others who handled their winnings differently and did not share such a fate, but the point is that more money does not come with a guarantee that life will be great. More money does not mean more happiness. Sometimes it's quite the opposite, which is why wisdom is more valuable than money.

In keeping with Solomon seeking more wisdom rather than more money, John Wesley was concerned about the faithful use of money. But he began by challenging the assumption that money is "the grand corrupter of the world, the bane of virtue, the pest of human society." He called that assumption "an empty rant." As he referred to Paul's letter to his protégé Timothy, Wesley pointed out that "the love of money ...is the root of all evil;" but not the thing itself. The fault does not lie in the money, but in them that use it." Further he went on to celebrate money as "an excellent gift of God, answering the noblest ends."

In fact, he preached an overwhelmingly positive and wise use of money as he said that...

In the hands of his children, it is food for the hungry, drink for the thirsty, raiment for the naked.... By it we may supply the place of an husband to the widow, and a father to the fatherless; we may be a defense for the

oppressed, a means of health to the sick, of ease to them that are in pain. It may be as eyes to the blind, as feet to the lame; yea, a lifter up from the gates of death (Earn, Save, Give, p. 40).

For Wesley—and for us—it wasn't—and isn't--about raising money for the Methodist movement or the church. The purpose is to equip people in the wise use of the resources in the most faithful and effective means. “Earn all you can. Save all you can. Give all you can”: simple rules to wisely deal with something that is a central part of all our lives.

What would you ask of God if given the chance to be assured you would receive it? What is most valuable to you? In what ways does your use of money express your faith in God, your journey with Christ? What practices might you change in order to more consistently place money in its proper place as a tool for expressing love of God and neighbor?

We need more wisdom. Most of us don't need more money but more wisdom in using what we have. May God give you all that you need of both.