

## Of Gain and Forfeit

September 17, In the Year of Our LORD, 2006

Gates Presbyterian Church

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Proverbs 1:20-33 and Mark 8:27-38

The eleven men shook their heads in disbelief. Had they just witnessed what they think they did? Did not two of their best friends just have a rather heated debate? And, just to complicate matters, even though both seemed to have good points, clearly the debate had just ended and, after strong words of rebuke by both, the issue was apparently settled – and one of their friends had made it abundantly *very* clear that he was right and that the other friend was wrong.

Pulled betwixt and between. To whom should one listen? Which message rings true? How easy it would be if all of life was simple, all issues crystal clear, that there be no ambiguity. Why are there so many voices saying seemingly contradictory things? Need messages be so convoluted?

Those *are* time-honored questions. Be it wisdom from on high from God or that articulated by humans, it often seems as though there is little clarity. Perhaps it isn't that the messages are muddied, but a matter of the ears and minds of the hearers that distort messages to their own liking ..... In our Gospel reading, we heard these words:

Jesus went on with His disciples to the villages of Caesarea Phillippi; and on the way He asked His disciples, "Who do people say that I am?"

As we read, there were many answers! Peter's answer was correct – well "sort of" correct. Peter got the title right, "Messiah," but his reasons were all wrong. Peter wrong? Yes, Peter was wrong. In fact, he *could not have been more wrong*. We read that exchange between Peter and Jesus when Peter first rebukes, chides and admonishes Jesus and then Jesus, in turn, takes Peter to task. Peter's error? It is classic, namely to assume that God and God's ways are *all* and *only* about success, power, honor, praise and esteem. While those words are appropriate when speaking of God, they avoid and sidestep other significant and just as important attributions of God's ways and our faith – like service, denial of worldly things, sacrifice and, yes, even rejection.

It is hard to argue with anything that promises success. It is difficult to compete with whatever promises life will be easier, that with just the right formula all of us can be rich, and by that we mean rich in *things*, or that faith and religion be about constant praise and unending goodness. How appealing it is to hear nothing but good things, good news – to come to worship and shut out the world and have places like this be sanctuaries from all that is evil, all that is devoid of goodness. It *is* important to be reminded how much God loves us, how special each of us is as children of the Almighty, how our self-esteem can be re-rooted in the realization that we are made in the wonderful image of God. But there are other aspects to worship – and who we are as God's own. There are some who ask why we must always have a "Prayer of Confession" in worship – that it is such a "downer" to speak of faults and brokenness. Apart from the fact that the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)'s Book of Order dictates confession be part of worship (W-2.1002), our brokenness, our sinfulness and the accompanying need for God's grace is part and parcel of what we believe!

Part of this week's lectionary reading from the Gospel of Mark includes these words from Jesus:

If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? [Mark 8:34-37]

I find it curious that this week's TIME magazine's cover asks "Does God Want You to Be Rich?" In smaller type we read, "Yes, say some megachurches. Others call it heresy. The debate over the new gospel of wealth." Those words are superimposed over a Rolls Royce with a cross as its hood ornament. What is irrefutably ironic is that in the article, one man, a follower of The Rev. Joel Osteen, puts a twist on the very words of Jesus as we found in this week's lectionary to be read in all Episcopal, Catholic, Lutheran churches and most other mainline churches. The man asks:

Why not gain the whole world plus my soul? ...

The article in TIME goes on to suggest that from this perspective,

Christians should keep an eye on heaven, but the good news is that God doesn't want us to wait. Known under a variety of names – Word of Faith, Health and Wealth, Name It and Claim It, Prosperity Theology – its emphasis is on God's promised generosity in this life and the ability of believers to claim it for themselves.

I shared the article from TIME with members of the Wednesday evening Bible Class, and pointed out that the "signature" verse for "Prosperity Theology" was John 10:10,

I have come that they may have life, and have it more abundantly.

The reaction of the class members was unanimous – and I think that is the first time the dozen or so of us have been unanimous on *anything*! In a nutshell, the reaction of the class was: "That's not what Jesus meant by abundance! Jesus meant an abundance of grace, an abundance of love, fellowship, peace, joy, hope, faith – Jesus didn't mean MONEY!" Frankly, the best retort comes from Rick Warren, author of "The Purpose Driven Life." In that magazine article, he wrote:

This idea that God wants everyone to be wealthy? Baloney. It's creating a false idol. You don't measure your self-worth by your net-worth.

But that is the *very* idol Jesus faced in His day! The definition of a "good Jew" was one who was healthy, wealthy, owned land, was learned and followed all of the rules the Jewish leaders claimed were important. Wealth was seen as a mark of God's favor. Poverty was a sign that poor persons or their parents or grandparents had committed sin. The Rev. Kirbyjon Caldwell, a mega-church pastor echoes the Old Testament theme I think Jesus tried to counter:

God wants you to own land. The entire Old Testament is all about land. Land represents that God is with you and God has blessed you.

We add to that The Rev. Joel Osteen and his wife speak of how God's favor allowed them to buy their dream house and it was God that bumped Mr. Osteen from economy to business class.

Who doesn't want to lay claim to that kind of faith? Who doesn't want to interpret Scripture in such a way that faith is about success, power, honor, praise, esteem and wealth? That image of faith was so appealing that no one less than Peter espoused it! At this point in Jesus' ministry, Peter had his mind on a reception in Jerusalem that was going to put Jesus on the throne of David and raise Jesus and His followers above the dirt and grime of walking those dusty towns of Galilee and Judea!

Here I stand on the Sunday when the Stewardship Committee wants me to introduce our theme for the year – Faith in Action. At first, my reaction to the timing was “Oh, great! Here is TIME talking about pastors and churches that get the whole idea of money wrong.” However, in this passage from the Gospel of Mark, Jesus gives us the response we need to hear – indeed speaks of how faith is more than just words but is about following, losing ones life, taking up ones cross.

Let me be clear! Jesus does *not* condemn wealth. Rather, Jesus wants to know who or what is controlling whom or what. Are we in charge, are we faithful to God with what we have? Are we willing to put our faith into action? Or, does our wealth and possessions own us, possess us and drive us? The image of a cross as a hood ornament on a Rolls Royce as depicted on the cover of TIME raises my blood pressure. But then so does the realization of how many people want to quote particular passages of Scripture as the overarching ones of the day but leave out or omit Jesus' desire that we share what we have with the poor and that we provide for the ministry and mission we might accomplish as the church. In the Letter of James last week we heard what could have easily served as a reminder of how cheap words can be – and how our faith is more than just words but is indeed about faith put into action – and in large measure put into action on behalf of others:

If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, “Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill,” and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that?

Fortunately, there are many images, found right here in the ministry and mission of the people of Gates Presbyterian Church to counter the cover of TIME as it sat on my desk all week. I could not help but think of the number of people who have graced our facility of late, not just last Sunday, but in a couple of weeks of choir rehearsals, committee meetings, a wedding, and two Memorial Services after which there were wonderful times of fellowship, as God's people gathered to comfort, not just with words, but with embraces, poignant memories and a physical presence that spoke volumes. And ... every time I left my office to go north to the Men's room, I could not help but pause and look at the collage of photos on the western wall that showed our youth putting their faith into action – and today, the first packages of underwear for the children in the Cameron Community Center neighborhood.

In our reading from the Gospel of Mark, Jesus invites us to “deny ourselves,” “take up our cross,” give of ourselves so that all might embrace the abundance of God's grace. Instead, just think where some people in Western New York want to put their energy! You would think that a teacher in Batavia undergoing a sex change operation meant the end of civilization and the Christian world! That teacher's rights under New York State law notwithstanding, *that* is an issue that needs to be front and center? If that teacher crosses a line and, for example, espouses others to consider such an operation, there should be appropriate ramifications, but why does a congregation in Batavia that goes by the name of “Grace Baptist Church” want to limit God's

grace? Is it because, like the leaders of Jesus' day, there is a belief that God's grace is reserved for the *chosen*, the *elect* or *special ones* who are so holy as to not need confession, or who believe they can pray to God in expectation of an abundance defined as riches?

As for TIME magazine, despite a rather good rendering of the debate about God and wealth – and in spite of the timeliness of the lead article in the context of today's reading from the Gospel of Mark – they negated any credit due with what they packaged *with* the magazine this week. Wrapped in plastic along with TIME was the Fall 2006 Supplement titled "Style & Design – Going for Gold, The Art of the Luxury Deal." When I opened the supplement, it fell to pages 98 and 99 that depict a cell phones, shoes, belt buckles and purses in 18 carat gold. The suggestion is that this is what we need in life – and that if we don't have it we are lesser! All I could think was how I should have selected The Rev. Harry Emerson Fosdick's hymn "God of Grace and God of Glory?" for this morning. Remember these lines from the third stanza?

Bend our pride to Thy control; shame our wanton selfish gladness rich in things and poor in soul. Grant us wisdom, grant us courage, lest we miss Thy kingdom's goal.

- Is it not enough to hear Jesus' rebuke of Peter nearly two thousand years ago?
- Is it not enough to hear the words from Proverbs that, in speaking of God's wisdom, tell us that "scoffers delight in scoffing and [that] fools hate knowledge," particularly when it is the knowledge of God?
- Is it not enough to remember Jesus' admonition to feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, care for the sick, imprisoned and needy?
- Is it not enough to recall Jesus' contention that if riches control us, it would be easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for us to get into heaven?
- Is it not enough for us to realize that each of us needs to examine our response to God's appeal that we be grateful and thankful givers, that if we can't give a scriptural tithe, ten percent, that we nonetheless, be intentional in how we determine what we do give for the ministry and mission of Christ's church – and that in giving of our time, our talent and our treasure, we put our faith into action?

In the end, the editors of TIME couldn't help but put their spin on the idea of whether God wants us to be rich or not. The last, appropriate line of the article is:

If God wants us to be rich in this life, no doubt it's ... richness in spirit that [God] is most eager for us to acquire.

To that I would say "Amen," except to close with words of our LORD seems more appropriate. In Red Letter editions of the Bible, the words of Jesus are printed in red. These words are red, but perhaps they should be bold and in italics and underlined as well, because it doesn't get any more direct than this:

If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life?

Amen.