

St. David's Presbyterian Church
St. John's, NL

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"Facing Topics We Don't Want to Face"
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Every week I pray and listen for what we should be talking about during this time in the service. I've done this for over twenty years and I still am amazed at what comes up from some of the same Scriptures that we have read over and over in the three year lectionary cycle.

The Bible is a book that addresses our lives. It is not simply a central piece of human literature, it is the main way we have recorded what God wants us to know is important to Him about life. In this recording process, we have an amazing diversity of literatures, narratives, poetry, songs, letters, warnings, oracles, apocalyptic, histories all there to introduce us to a different way of thinking about our relationship to God.

We know this about the Bible. We also know that the Bible often introduces topics which are uncomfortable to talk about. So I wanted to start off today a little differently by having you imagine what topic you really would not like to hear a sermon on. What one uncomfortable topic would really bother you if I began to speak or interpret Scripture on it? Maybe there are many, just think of one. Just think about it for a moment. *Pause* Now let me assign you homework. I don't do that very often. Ask God today or this week for why the fear or anxiety comes about something He might want to address in your life. And if you feel able, ask God to address whatever that topic is. Then listen.

Then let me reassure you that I probably am not speaking about that topic today. I say "probably" because there is a very clear theme in today's Scripture readings. But you might have been thinking about hot button topics such as sexuality, provincial politics, Canada's role in Afghanistan, pornography, recent assaults, pro-life vs. choice, evolution vs. creationism, televangelists, gender dynamics...I'm not really sure what qualifies as a "scary topic" for me to bring to the body of Christ in this place.

What I do know is that God wants to address every area of our lives. He wants to be involved in our politics, our friendships, in our studies, in our employment, in our family relationships, in our ethical decisions, in our

major life decisions, and across the board in our lives. God has lots to say to us but it is hard to listen.

So we give this portion of time every week to say we want to hear God speak.

But I realized last week when the Scriptures seemed to emphasize what our attitude to money is, I began to be uncomfortable. I think to myself, "Nobody wants to hear another sermon about money..." Then I think that if that's the case then I don't really want to talk about money either. So then I ask myself, or more importantly ask the Lord, "If I don't want to talk about money, and the people don't want to hear about it, then why would I talk about it?"

And the answer comes, "Because the Lord felt it was important enough to address in 1 Timothy and Luke and Jeremiah." In fact, the Lord talks about money lots more than even heaven and hell and salvation. So that's the end of the meta-sermon, or the sermon about sermons. Now the sermon:

But why would we hear about Jeremiah wanting to do some real estate deal as if that were an important point. I believe it is because he was about to pay full price for a field just before the city of Jerusalem was to be sacked and all its inhabitants taken away to Babylon. Normally you'd get a rock bottom price for a field that will be worth nothing in a short period of time. But God urged him to pay full price for this field to tell the people that God is taking a longer view on what is about to happen to them, and that He is already looking beyond the judgment to the re-settlement of the area.

And when we look at our finances, we need to talk to our loved ones about giving beyond what we normally give so that we can have a longer term view of what is going on. How can we shape lives for the better with our money today? What will we do before we eventually give it all away. And that's something that we will all do some day, give every cent away. Because as you know, four out of four die. There is no question about the death, the only question is about the legacy before the death.

Now if it is true that you only get to keep what you give away, spiritually speaking, how would that affect your current budgeting? How would make you think differently about your time?

Jesus made it even starker than that. He talked about a couple of different people, one without medical care coverage, homeless and another who lived in complete luxury right next door to where the homeless man camped. Even the rich man's pets had it better than the poor man. So Jesus takes the long view, and says they both died. One went to heaven, the other to hell. Now let me stop at this point and say that yes, the Scripture does say that the homeless man went to the bosom of Abraham, the place of the faithful, to the ancestral home of the covenant bearer. I believe this translates well as heaven. The other went to a place for the dead which was a place of torment, which translates well as hell.

I believe there is a real heaven and a real hell. The real heaven begins when we say "yes" to relationship to Christ, change our minds about rebellion against God and begin to seek the ways of heaven on earth. Some day beyond this life, there is life which goes on in God's presence unlike this life in physics (i.e. time and space) and in relationships (i.e. no more sin). Hell also starts in this life, as we choose against God, rebel against God's justice and reign, say no to life and justice and yes to self-indulgence as much as possible. Hell after this life is then a continuation of the choices of this life in isolation from the One who was scorned throughout this life. There are real consequences for our spiritual choices in this life.

Lazarus went to heaven, the rich man went to hell. The rich man still wanted to be served, even as he was in torment and realized his life was over and that the tables had been turned. He asked to be comforted. His selfishness was still the predominant characteristic of his life. He was confronted by the fact that he never comforted others who were close by when he could have. So when his request for self-comfort was denied, he asked on behalf of his siblings who apparently were just like he was.

And you know who his siblings are. We are his siblings. It is our comfort that is challenged again and again by the gospel. His request to send a messenger to the five brothers is denied. In fact, God says that even if they were to receive a miraculous message from a person who had come back from the dead, they wouldn't believe it, and it wouldn't change their minds. Here Jesus is referring to himself.

So why did Jesus tell this story? Is it to say everyone who is well to do is going to hell and every poor person is going to heaven? No. It is to

encourage caring for one another with the resources we already have. It is to show where selfishness ends up, in torment. It is to challenge us to see the longer view of our lives. Like the bumper sticker I saw once: Come to Church, Don't wait until six strong men have to take you there. The idea is to have the perspective of eternity in every day life.

Paul practically reflects this in 1 Timothy 6. He says if you get the "I need to get rich" virus in whatever form, whether it be the "winthelotto" strain, or the "workaholic" strain or the "neverenuf" strain, then you should consider getting inoculated with the following anti-viral medications:

- 1) Take a good dose of the long view of life. What do you want people to say about you when you are dead. Scrooge got a good dose of this in the Christmas Carol, when he saw his employees whom he cheated and oppressed stealing his goods the moment he died. Paul simply says, "you can't take it with you."
- 2) Take an inventory of what you do have and determine to be content with that. I call this a dose of thanksgiving, not the turkey variety, but simply being thankful and pausing everyday to give thanks in that way.
- 3) Take a good dose of reality. Notice how those who have won the millions usually don't have better lives... Have you read some of the stories of those lottery winners whose lives are destroyed by the riches? I know, some would say they would like the chance to see...but the point is not the lottery, it is how far some go to try to be rich, the gambling addiction, the workaholism, the miserliness of some...all real life reminders as an antidote to the television images of the lives of the rich and famous.
- 4) Finally if you do have lots of money, lots of financial resources, Paul does not condemn you. He encourages you too to take the long view of what you have and the legacy you need to build not only for your reputation but for the reputation of the Lord and his people. The prescription here is for generosity, sharing, and making your earthly riches into heavenly ones.

I think why I get uncomfortable talking about money is that many times people want to somehow take advantage of us to take our money for themselves. It's easier (maybe) to talk about righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance, gentleness (6:11).

All of us need to trust God with our finances, with our relationships, trusting the One who knows life better than we do; listening and being an agent for Life, for Jesus. And when he wants to talk to us about something that may be uncomfortable, I pray you and I can work it out together, having enough trust and care for one another to look at life issues and trust God for how to approach them together.

Let us pray.