

“Your Life is Not Your Own”

“Therefore I tell, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more important than food, and the body more important than clothes?” How could Jesus say such things? Did he not understand that people need to feed themselves, clothe themselves, provide for their families? He also said, “You cannot serve both God and Money.” Why not? Aren’t many people happily doing so every day? Look at all the financial institutions, financial planners, investment vehicles, and accounting that people do. And yet a lot of people still attend church. Maybe Jesus cannot understand life in our times – it seems to be getting more complex. Or, perhaps Jesus really does understand us; perhaps he can see into the depths of our souls.

One of the dearest myths of America is the myth of the self-made man (and woman). It has become the focal point of individualism. We live in a competitive society, that its positive aspects, but also carries unhealthy aspects that seep into our souls. Much of advertising deliberately stimulates practically every selfish emotion known to humanity. Ambition for preeminence is celebrated; as is achievement on your own - “I did it my way.” I love the leaders – both in church and in secular society – who feed their ambition by portraying themselves as humble men and women with only the best interests of the people at heart. Accumulation of material riches, most often for solely personal satisfaction, is honored. So often, people who find success in life come to believe that they did so completely on their own. (Palo Alto: one pastor saying, these people don’t think they need God; they can buy their own God). What has God got to do with it?

It is in this very context that Jesus says, “So do not worry, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them.” The problem with humans is that we tend to trust the instruments of our blessings, rather than the source. Jesus did not abolish ambition or possessions. But He did redirect it away from self to God. “...seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.” Jesus is saying, by word and example, your life is not your own. He gave his life for us, for our salvation. Jesus knew His life was not his own, something he was teaching his disciples, and wants to teach us. 1 Corinthians 6:20 reminds us, “You are not your own; you were bought at a

price.” Several years ago, while at a family camp, I talked with my friend Al Vom Steeg, then President of the MSUM. We were talking about mission service. He made a comment that has echoed within my soul ever since. He said, “Richard, Your life is not your own.”

I too have many ambitions, and many that have not been achieved; some set aside because of the needs of others, or a sense of duty or service. I am sure that others here today could say the same. Look at your life. Whose life is it anyway? Until God is in control of my life, I am out of control.

There is another cultural myth we face today. The myth of the search for the soul. This myth calls for you to search for your true self or your own spirituality. The great irony is that Jesus says that to find ourselves we must lose ourselves. The basic Christian understanding of life is that God has given life for His purposes, not for self-absorbed contemplation. The Christian life is to understand what the Cross means and what God’s call is upon my life.

We do not live solely for ourselves, our personal spiritual quest, our jobs, our money, our houses, even for our families! All these things are important and not to be neglected, but they are not our ultimate purpose. We are, each one of us, first of all called to full-time Christian service to faithfully fulfill God’s purposes.

Don’t you recall how Jesus fed the 5,000? (Matt. 14:13-21). The rushing crowd had completely spoiled the purpose of his trip. He was wanting to get away, be alone for awhile. But when he and his disciples got to remote place it was no longer lonely, but trampled by a milling crowd. Most would exclaim “Can’t they leave me alone for even one hour?” I imagine there are some mothers here who have felt that at times with children. Or others who have felt that way at work. Someone once said people are x % protons, x % electrons, x % neutrons, and 90% morons. Aren’t there days when you feel that way?

Jesus didn’t see those people through the eyes of one who counted life so dear to himself, but through the eyes of one who came to seek and to save the lost. It says Jesus “had compassion on them,” where anyone else would have been moved to a great irritation. Not worrying about where food would come from, He took the meager resources of his disciples - five loaves and two fish - and gave thanks to God for what they had. It was enough.

Resources always come to mind when faced with a situation, be it personal, or for our church. Can we afford to do this? Do we have the personnel to pull this off? People usually assume they are typical. The tightfisted assume that the congregation will respond to a new idea in a tightfisted manner. People who tithe figure that most Christians tithe. An idea to develop a new program or expand a ministry tends to be opposed by most of the tightfisted because they can't believe the congregation would support it. The tithers say, "Go for it." Generous givers, by a high percentage, are supporters of mission. They are more likely to believe that the Lord will provide if we venture out in faith, because that's what they've been doing. It is not how much of the world we have that determines our generosity toward God, but how much God has of us.

Jesus said, "You cannot serve both God and Money" (Greek - μαμμωνα).¹ Interestingly, the Bible devotes 500 verses to prayer; less than 500 are about faith; but over 2,000 speak of money and possessions. Of Jesus' parables, 16 out of 38 parables are about money or possessions; and likewise for 1 out of 10 verses in the Gospels. Why? Money & possessions represent security to us and easily push God out of the picture. Managing our lives for God is the refusal to let things manage us. That is the most important, the only thing, to do while here on this earth.

Setting our bodies in motion is a signal to our souls. Standing to recite the Apostles Creed our body says, "Yes, I believe this." Kneeling to pray, our body says, "I am not God." Placing my finances and time in God's hands says, "Lord I trust you and want to serve."

[We all live in a time crunch; I feel it every day around here. It is so important to set priorities and pray. Consider this: A Pennsylvania consulting firm has just released one of those studies estimating the amount of time the average American will spend doing various things over the course of a lifetime. The research took more than a year. The results are not encouraging.

Time spent opening junk mail: 8 months.

Time spent sitting at stoplights: 6 months.

Time spent searching for misplaced objects: 1 year.

Time spent trying to return phone calls to people who never seem to be in: 2 years.

Time spent doing housework: 4 years.

Time spent standing in line: 5 years.

Kind of puts my time in perspective. Surely there is time to serve the Lord.]

¹Aramaic: wealth or money; may be a personification of the god Mammon.

Jesus said, “Do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself.” “One of the illusions of life is that the present hour is not the critical, decisive hour.”² Write it on your heart: this is the day the Lord has made! This is the time to serve Him. Jesus takes his ministry into the places where people must live out their daily lives. He brings healing, not just of the physical kind. We can do that too. In truth, your life is not your own. As the hymn says “We belong to God, we belong to God.”

At First Church we have a generous mixture of people from all over. None of us is a foreigner or alien, but all fellow citizens with God’s people and members of God’s household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. In him we too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.

Write it on your heart: today is the day of your salvation! Today is the day to serve the Lord!

²Ralph Waldo Emerson