

Because Life Isn't Something that Just Happens
A Message by Rev. Dr. Richard Lapehn
First Presbyterian Church of Barberton: October 14, 2018

Scripture: Matthew 6:19-24; Deuteronomy 30:19,20

I. Since we experienced a few cool days this week, my mind wandered to the impending winter months. (I know, a dark mind, no?)

I decided to look at the average winter snowfall for our area and the internet told me that on average we experience 46 days of snowfall per winter, meaning 1/10th inch or more of snow on 46 days during the winter. Our total average snowfall is 48 in.

Contrast our winter weather with Dayton, Ohio. On average, Dayton will have 10 days of snowfall per winter, and a grand total of 12 inches of snow each winter. Twelve inches throughout the entire winter hardly seems worth dusting off your shovel; it certainly doesn't seem like the place where you would invest in a snowblower.

But I have a true story of five neighbors who lived on the same street and were all good friends. One of the men, Bud, approached the others during the Fall and suggested that they go in together to purchase a snowblower that they could each use. He would store the snowblower in his mini-barn next to his house and give each man a key to the mini-barn. ("Use it when you need it, and just top off the gas.")

It sounded like a great plan to save money and have the convenience of a snowblower, if Dayton received a significant snowfall.

Bud's friends never responded. So Bud went out and bought his own snowblower. That winter, Dayton did have one snowstorm that piled up about 5 inches of snow. When Bud woke up and saw the snow, he got out his snowblower and started working on his driveway. As he did so, he saw every one of his friends come out and start up their snowblowers.

Each friend had simply bought their own. There were five expensive snowblowers among five good friends who lived door-to-door. There was not another snowfall that winter requiring a snowblower. Bud thought, “what a waste.”

II. What do you think? Is it a waste to have a expensive tool that may be used once per year when you could share the expense with a family member or friend? Or, is the “used once every 2-years item” simply representative of life in America?

Every disciple of Christ is aware that we are to love God with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength. But what about our wallet?

There are a sizeable number of persons who do not attend worship at any church primarily because they do not want to be asked to contribute their hard-earned money. They say they can’t stand it when churches ask for their money. To avoid hearing the requests, some have left the church for good.

In the life of the church, the gift of your time, energy, creativity, and, yes, financial resources is what we refer to a being a “good steward” of the gifts of life God has given to you. It’s part and parcel of being a follower of Jesus.

III. Jesus’ definition of stewardship is far more encompassing and direct. Almost 40 percent of his parables found in the Gospels deal with true faith and faith’s relationship to our money and possessions.

Jesus’ encounter with the young ruler (a privileged, educated, and well-respected young man) puts to rest any notion that a commitment to faithful discipleship can be separated from our economic lifestyle practices. When the young man asks, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” Jesus’ response doesn’t allow wiggle room to define eternal life as simply a personalized faith you can develop on your own, or the kindly suggestion that making mostly moral choices will suffice.

“You still lack one thing,” Jesus says. “Sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me” (Luke 18:18-22). Jesus knew the rich young man’s heart – that his love for his stuff far exceeded his love for God.

But when 40% of Jesus’ parables speak of money and possessions, Jesus was saying there is no clearer indicator of our ultimate values than our financial priorities and practices – how we spend, how we live, how we save, and how we give reveal the true altar of our hearts.

In Jesus’ own words, “For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. No one can serve two masters; either you’ll hate the one and love the other; or you’ll be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money” (Matt. 6:21,25).

IV. We live in a commodity culture that promises happiness only if we accumulate an abundance of possessions. I am guilty of, we are all guilty of, purchasing things we could very well live without. It is not easy to live without purchasing entirely too much stuff, even small things placed in that oh-so-convenient place near the check out counter. The marketing experts know human nature.

In a world where people spend \$310 million on costumes for their pets (especially in the Halloween season), and \$5 billion over the year on entertaining ringtones for their cell phones, it is not easy to restrict our purchases to the things in life that I need.

And there is nothing inherently wrong with owning stuff and consuming stuff. Consuming keeps us alive and fuels our economies. The problem lies in the excess consumption, excess and unnecessary purchases.

There are no easy answers concerning what it is that someone needs to get by, but it is worth our time to consider, especially

in this season when your church is asking for your financial support again in 2019.

Jen Hatmaker in her book, *An Experimental Mutiny against Excess* reminds her readers, “The average human gets around twenty-five thousand days on this earth, and most in the USA will get hundreds or a few thousand more days than others around the world.

But even 30,000 days is a breath. We live in that thin space where faith and obedience have relevance. We have the blessing of this one life to offer; there’s no Plan B. In this time we can fight for justice, we can educate and nurture those in need, we can serve and love our family and others, or not. Whatever it is we choose to do with the gift of this life will go with us. None of our luxuries will accompany us, however. Then, we will have our moment to stand before Jesus and say, ‘This is how I lived.’”

The choice is ours to make. Thousands of years ago, Moses presented the same option to the people of Israel as I read from the OT book of Deuteronomy. “Choose life,” Moses exhorts the people, “loving the Lord your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him” (Deut. 30:19,20).

Each and every day there are choices to be made. What will be my priorities today, tomorrow, or the next day? How will my wallet reflect what I believe and what I want others desperately to know so that they will know life in Christ?

The questions of morality and money are far-reaching. As I mentioned in the beginning of this message, what if I shared the expense of some lightly or rarely used tool, for example, with others.

By paying only 1/3 the total cost – sharing with two other partners – I would free up money that could be used for a contribution to our soup kitchen fund to feed the hungry, or I could plow more money into a much needed 401K, or I could

use that money to buy relatively more expensive items that are fairly traded or ethically farmed?

The way we spend our money, large amounts and small, reflects what we value. God did not create us to be simply consumers of stuff. Rather, we were created to be producers of God's blessings in the lives of others.

I don't believe that Jesus literally wants us to give away everything we own, have, or enjoy. If I give away all that I have, I can no longer be a source of health, healing, or blessing in the lives of others.

I do believe, however, that Jesus calls us to regularly review our fiscal priorities. How does your wallet reflect your faith in Christ and your desire that all persons know and love him as you do. May we spend, give, and live with the conscience of Christ. Amen.