

Investing in a God-sized Plan
A Message by Rev. Dr. Richard Lapehn
First Presbyterian Church of Barberton: October 21, 2018

Scripture: Jeremiah 32:1-15; Deuteronomy 24:14-22

I. Bono is the name of the well-known lead singer of the British rock group U2. The U2 band has enjoyed sold-out concerts and world-wide adulation for almost three decades.

In addition to being a rock star, Bono is a human-rights activist. At the onset of his great fame, many years ago Bono and his wife took a trip to Ethiopia to see first-hand the suffering in developing nations. Hiding their identities, Bono and his wife worked alongside the Christian Mission called World Vision during their time in Ethiopia.

That trip changed the way Bono saw his place in the world. He became very well read in the Bible. In an interview conducted with Pastor Bill Hybels more than ten years ago (Bono Vox – Interview 7/9, Youtube), Bono pointed out that there are 2,003 Scripture passages that pertain to the poor.

That is the second largest subject next to those dealing with personal redemption and salvation. Bono pointed out that the only part of the Gospels in which Jesus described judgment day is found in Matthew 25, a passage dealing with the poor and down-trodden. In Matthew 25, Jesus says, “Just as you helped one of the least of these members of my family (by offering food, or drink, or shelter, or clothing), you did it for me” (Matt. 25:40).

That said, Bono rhetorically asked Pastor Hybels, “Why have we amassed wealth and power if we cannot go to the aid of our sisters and brothers?”

Bono summarized his point asking, “[From a global perspective] Can an accident of longitude and latitude really decide whether you live or whether you die? In our global community – where we can live-stream events in real time from

anywhere in the world – can a Christian really say, ‘it’s not my concern?’”

II. In my own life, I was born to a middle-class family in Indianapolis, Indiana. When compared to the majority of people in the **world**, I was also born into great privilege: I had food to eat every day, clothes to wear, fine public education, two parents who did their level best (no parents were/are even nearly perfect) in loving and guiding me, good medical care, and the opportunity to go to college, if I so desired.

Compared to my brothers and sisters in the human family around the world, and even those in our region who had many more challenges that I have faced, does that mean that God favors me personally more than he favors the single mother in Darfur, Sudan, or the single mother in our community trying her level best to raise her children?

If your background is at all similar to my own – having had food, shelter, family who largely cared for you, opportunities to create your own future – does that mean that God favors you more than those who lacked the life you knew growing up?

No. Any privilege that you have known does not imply favored status, but rather responsibility.

We are responsible to seek ways to aid others in need; in the Bible those most often addressed as in need were the poor, widows, and orphans.

III. In the passage from Deuteronomy that Jim read for us, Moses reiterated what God expected from God’s chosen and privileged people when they entered the Promised Land.

Moses said, “These are the decrees and laws you must be careful to follow in the land that the Lord, the God of your fathers, has given you to possess” (Deut.12:1). In other words, Moses said, *This is the stuff to get right.*

1. Do not take advantage of a hired worker who is poor and needy. (v.14)
2. Do not deprive a resident alien or an orphan of justice (v.17)
3. When harvesting your field and you overlook a sheaf, don't go back and get it. Leave it for someone else to find and use. (v.19)
4. When you beat your olive trees, do not go over the branches a second time. Leave what remains for the resident alien, the orphan, and the widow. (v.20)
5. When you harvest the grapes in your vineyard, do not go over the vines again. Leave what remains for others. (21)

So we are not to consume everything we produce. We are not to simply build bigger and bigger barns. Rather, we are to take the provisions with which we are blessed and use some of that to help others, especially those who struggle mightily.

In Luke 4 Jesus speaks of his purpose – and ours as his followers – by quoting Isaiah 61:1, “The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is on me, because the Lord has anointed me to preach good news to the poor.”

I take that to mean that if the gospel we demonstrate in the world does not serve the poor (those who are poor in spirit who do not know Christ, those who are poor financially, those who lack the abilities that you possess), then it is not the good news.

Our privilege carries deep responsibility. And it is a responsibility that we can fulfill by caring enough to engage our heart, mind, and strength of body to meet the needs we see.

In Jesus' brief three-year ministry on this earth, he modeled compassion for the least and the lost, for the sick and the hungry.

Likewise, God calls us to serve the least and the lost, the sick and the hungry. The gift I give to another is not to show how smart or even how compassionate I am which I will prove to you by fixing you and your problem.

No, the gift I give is my faith-based response to my place in God's world, and my grateful response to the privilege I know today in being of sound mind, body, and spirit.

I would like to say that the gifts we offer will immediately alleviate suffering and pain. But that's not always true.

IV. In the OT book of Jeremiah, I read a story that took place in 588 B.C. The capital city of Jerusalem is under siege, and God's chosen prophet is under arrest by his own king, King Zedekiah.

The prophet was Jeremiah and he had angered the king. Jeremiah was going all about town telling the people that it was their own misbehavior causing the attacks on their city.

Jeremiah the prophet was irritating King Zedekiah by pointing out that the Israelite people had turned their backs on God. The people of Israel were worshipping the things they created instead of worshipping the Creator. Sound familiar?

In the midst of Israel's disobedience, God had revealed to Jeremiah that Jerusalem would fall into enemy hands. After a number of decades in captivity, however, the remnant of Israel would return to Jerusalem.

In that context, God asked Jeremiah to do the strangest thing; and Jeremiah obeyed.

God directed Jeremiah to use his money to buy a piece of property that would soon be worthless as it fell into the enemies' possession. Jeremiah was to use his finances as seed money for God's future harvest – God's promise that the people would one day return to their homeland.

Jeremiah himself would never return to Jerusalem, but the money he invested in a plot of land gave the people hope, encouraged their faith, and strengthened their resolve during the years of their captivity.

What God asked Jeremiah to do sounded ludicrous to the average person. Many actions of the faithful seemed ludicrous to onlookers.

- Noah built an ark on an arid desert plain.
- Abraham departed from his comfortable and well-appointed ranch in Ur with his wife to search for the Promised Land to which God would lead them.
- Queen Esther risked her life by appearing before the King of Persia to plead for her people.

What appeared to others as a strange plan was actually a God-sized plan. Jeremiah invested in a God-sized plan.

V. There is no other economic delivery system to care for the poor in our area, to feed the hungry, to encourage the weak, and to share the good news of the Gospel in our area than us.

The financial gifts we give are God's economic engine for serving our part of the world.

I am so very thankful for all who have come before us to invest in the God-sized plan of First Presbyterian Church. And I thank you for your generosity.

As Lisa begins to play our final hymn, those who are able to make a financial pledge for 2019 are invited to come forward and place your pledge card in the basket in front of the communion table.

It is our privilege to give so that others may find Christ and know God's love. Amen.