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*I Timothy 6:6-19 / Luke 16:19-31  
18 Pentecost / Proper 21 / Year C  
30 September 2007  
Preached by the Rev. David Fredrickson*

*There is great gain in godliness combined with contentment; for we brought nothing into the world, so that we can take nothing out of it; but if we have food and clothing, we will be content with these. (I Tim. 6:6-8)*

This morning I am going to talk to you about something that is very important and yet very difficult. This will not be an easy sermon to hear and frankly, it isn't going to be a very easy sermon to preach. But truth telling is one of the most important things that I do as your spiritual leader and this morning I need to tell you the truth. This morning I am going to talk to you about money. Now I don't talk about money very often from this pulpit, much less often than I should given the fact that money is the chief spiritual issue of our time, but talk about it, I must.

Over the past several weeks, the scriptures have been challenging to say the least. We have encountered a God who demands our complete commitment, our complete attention, and our complete adoration. This morning we have a gospel text that brings all this into focus because implicit in this story is the powerful example of how human beings build walls between themselves and that which makes them uncomfortable. As with the rich man in this morning's gospel, the cost of building such walls is the sacrifice of the soul.

In the gospel this morning Jesus tells a story about a man named Lazarus and his life at the doorstep of a rich man. It is interesting that the rich man

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doesn't have a name. His wealth was unable to save him and neither did it give him any leverage to talk himself out of his predicament upon his death. The critical thing about this story, however, is that the rich man was able to live his life without acknowledging the fact that Lazarus was even there sitting on his front porch. He had essentially built a wall between himself and Lazarus' suffering ultimately to the peril of his own soul.

Two weeks ago at the vestry meeting I acknowledged to the members of the vestry the Lazarus that sits upon our doorstep. A Lazarus that has been with us all the years that I have been here, one that we all notice, but don't really want to acknowledge. That Lazarus is our church's financial situation and the walls we have built between this Lazarus and ourselves has been built with fear and paralysis. This Lazarus has become the millstone hanging around our necks and I believe is the culprit that is keeping people away from church, both newcomers and our own membership. Our attendance has not come back from the normal dip that occurs in the summer. Our financial struggle is sapping the life out of our parish and for the most part so far we, as a congregation, have felt powerless to do anything about it. The pressure to fundraise is consuming our time and our energy. As wonderful as the fellowship is in doing these fundraisers, the pressure to make more and more money with them is causing us to panic and become edgy. I urge you to think about how much time and energy we put into our fundraisers and then think about how much

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more of an impact we could have on our community if we put that time and energy into reaching out to our friends and neighbors, into doing real and creative ministry.

This morning we have perhaps one of the most wonderful pictures of the Christian life that exists in the Scripture.

There is great gain in godliness combined with contentment; [it says in I Timothy] for we brought nothing into the world, so that we can take nothing out of it; but if we have food and clothing, we will be content with these. But those who want to be rich fall into temptation and are trapped by many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, and in their eagerness to be rich some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pains. But as for you, man of God, shun all this; pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance, gentleness. Fight the good fight of the faith; take hold of the eternal life, to which you were called and for which you made the good confession in the presence of many witnesses.... As for those who in the present age are rich, command them not to be haughty, or to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but rather on God who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. They are to do good, to be rich in good works, generous, and ready to share, thus storing up for themselves the treasure of a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of the life that really is life.

Amazing isn't it? What a snapshot of who and what we are called to be; godly and content. At the vestry meeting two weeks ago I made it clear that at current pledging levels, we can only afford a part-time priest and by next year at this time a part-time priest will be a reality. And I made it clear that I cannot afford to be that part-time priest. Certainly we can cut the staff and try to go without a youth pastor, a secretary, a sexton and an organist, but I would not permit that to happen. Their jobs are as important; if not more important than

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the clergy's and without them there would be no way to build a foundation for the future. Now I am not raising this up to bring about more panic and fear, but to help us all realize that we can choose to take advice from the author of I Timothy and combine godliness with contentment.

You know as well as I do that we are all called to tithe; tithing is the minimum standard of giving for all Episcopalians and all Christians. It is our confession that all we have is from God, our jobs, our health, our gifts, our ability to provide for our families, our time. None of this belongs to us.

We brought nothing into the world and we will take nothing out of it. In most cases, a tithe doesn't take food off our tables or force us to miss a mortgage payment. It does cause us, however, to sacrifice. We are all called to sacrifice, each and every one of us. We are called to sacrifice and have faith in something beyond ourselves. But first we have to ask, is our church worth sacrificing for?

We say we can't do it, we can't tithe, but I urge you to look at all the money we waste. How much money do we spend on Dunkin Donuts coffee every week; \$2.50 per day 5 days per week is \$650.00 per year. I know that this is going to be harsh, but how much do we spend on cigarettes every week? 1 pack per day comes to over \$1800 per year. How about digital cable, do we really need it? How expensive of a car do we really need to drive. How big a house or boat or camper do we really need? How many clothes do we need to

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own, how many pairs of shoes or ties? I know that I am stepping on some toes here, but these are questions that we need to ask ourselves. Are we living godly and content lives? Here is the ultimate question, are any of these things more important than the ministry we have here to our youth, more important than our outreach, more important than the worship and pastoral care that occurs here or the religious education of ourselves and our children?

I am not trying to make you feel guilty, I am really not. I am only trying to get us to understand the magnitude of the choices we all make. And then I am forcing you to ask the question, what is this community worth to you? How important is it that this community is here? Are you willing to sacrifice coffee or cigarettes or cable television or our address or the insignia on our car, you fill in the blanks, to insure that ministry of this parish continues and thrives, to help it reach out to the people of Wareham with the gospel of Jesus Christ?

Certainly it is fair to ask me and my family if we tithe. And the answer is, "not quite. My family gives \$5500 per year to this church and that is about 8.5%. Could we do better, yes and every year we get closer to a true tithe. Others in this parish give more. Our largest givers in terms of money aren't our wealthiest members, contrary to what people believe. Our largest giver gives nearly \$8000 per year and this family is not wealthy by any stretch of the imagination. It is a family with children and a mortgage and all the other bills that we all face.

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As the people of God each of us is called to give generously and joyfully. We are called to give our first fruits to this work, to the work of the gospel. Many of us give to the church from our discretionary income, from what is left over at the end of the month, but God will not honor our scraps. We are called to give from our first fruits. If you write checks, the first check of the month should be your church check, not your mortgage, or your gas bill or your electric bill, but your pledge to the church and every member of this church is called by God not only pledge, but to begin working toward a tithe. If you need to begin by pledging a dollar a week, fine, but each of us must begin, regardless of how much it is.

Finally, we all have to remember that the church is not a business. We are called to give year in and year out for the rest of our lives. The church and its ministry is like a child, it needs to be fed everyday and every year. The future is in our hands. We must stop being afraid of this. In the next several weeks we are going to embark on a very aggressive stewardship program this year. I am going to be calling on people who are not necessarily on the stewardship committee to help head this thing up. We either raise the money we need to run this church, somewhere in the neighborhood of \$230,000. The time is now, we cannot continue to live off of the generosity of our past parishioners any longer. If we are raising money to simply sustain the church that is about 80 pledgers giving about \$3000 per year. That isn't very much money really. However, if our

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goal is to grow deeper in our spiritual lives, grow closer to God, then each one of us needs to seriously consider reordering our lives and begin working toward a tithe. It takes courage, faith and determination, but the reward is freedom, joy, a clear conscience, and a closer walk with God. Think of the burden that will be lifted off of your shoulders if you simply make the decision to do it and let God make you help you be content with it.

In Jesus Name; Amen.