

Sunday, October 11, 2015
Rev. Diane Monti-Catania

Sermon: “Careful What You Ask For!”

Jesus looked at the man, loved him – noted that he was lacking just one thing; gave him some instructions and closed with the invitation: *Come, follow me.*

Let’s put ourselves in this man’s shoes.

He is a faithful follower of the commandments – a law-abiding citizen.

He has heard of Jesus’ promise of eternal life – the one thing perhaps that he does not believe he possesses.

He seeks Jesus, the teacher, falls at his feet and begs for direction.

This story represents the only time in the gospels when someone is invited to follow Jesus and turns down the invitation.

Will Willamon notes: “A person like us is being invited to be a disciple of Jesus, and this person like us walks in the other direction--and the reason was money.”

What sort of reasons would you have for turning down an invitation to follow Jesus?

As I reflected on this during the week, I realized that I have this conversation with people all the time.

There is a host of reasons that people have for not making a commitment to Jesus; to church; to service; to discipleship – sometimes it is money; sometimes it is time; sometimes it is the inability to commit to something unknown.

For today, let’s focus on money and the many ways that it influences our lives.

I will start by saying that there is nothing wrong with money.

It is perhaps one of the most intriguing human inventions; created to facilitate the sharing and exchanging of goods and services among individuals and groups of people.

John Wesley’s sermon on this topic made clear: “In the hands of God’s children, it is food for the hungry, drink for the thirsty, raiment for the naked: It gives to the traveller and the stranger where to lay his head. By it we may supply the place of a husband to the widow, and of a father to the fatherless. We maybe a defense for the oppressed, a means of health to the sick, of ease to them that are in pain; it may be as eyes to the blind, as feet to the lame; yea, a lifter up from the gates of death!”

We need money.

What Jesus is addressing with the rich man is the way we feel about money.

James Smith, in a book called *Desiring the Kingdom* encourages us to examine what we love ‘ultimately.’

“By ultimately” he says, “I mean what we love above all, that to which we pledge allegiance, that to which we are devoted in a way that overrules other concerns and interests. Our ultimate love is what defines us, what makes us the kind of people we are.”

What defines you?

What is the most important thing in your life?

Is there something that you love so much that you would turn down a personal invitation to follow Jesus?

In her book, *The Soul of Money*, Lynn Twist describes money as “the most universally motivating, mischievous, miraculous, maligned, and misunderstood part of contemporary life.”

She tells the story of an indigenous group in the Amazon rainforest, the Achuar, who lived without money for thousands of years.

Generations of Achuar had grown up, worked to raise families, built homes and maintained communities, all without money.

Reciprocity was the social currency.

It was understood that everyone shared with everyone else and everyone took care of everyone else.

It sounds much like the early Christian movement, though the Achuar lived in complete isolation from other communities.

First came the missionaries, and then the oil companies.

The Achuar people realized that to preserve their land and culture, they would have to learn to function in the monied world.

They sent one of their young men to the United States to be educated as their representative – to learn the language of money.

Twist’s encounter with this young man precipitated an examination of her own relationship to money.

She writes, “our behavior with and around money is often at odds with our most deeply held values, commitments, and ideals – our soul.”

She defines soul as “what deeply matters to human beings: the well-being of the people we love; ourselves and the world in which we live.”

Each person’s relationship to money is different.

The relationship is influenced by your upbringing, your education, your friends – whether you feel like you have enough money, or need more.

It changes over time.

For some, their relationship to money is influenced by their faith.

My colleagues in other faith traditions use ‘tithing’ as a description of their congregations.

“He is a good, tithing man.”

Tithing is the biblical reference to giving first fruits, ten percent, of all you produce to God.

It is referenced almost forty times in scripture and it was a common practice in the early church.

Now, in biblical times, as well as the early church, it was the church that met the needs of the community.

Today, as you well know from your own mailboxes, there are numerous organizations that take responsibility for addressing those needs.

The tithing principle, therefore, need not be applied only to church giving, but to the amount of money you give away for the well-being of the community – of God’s world.

I like the perspective of one writer who pointed out how fortunate we are that God lets us keep 90 percent of what God gives us.

Today, in churches such as ours, the average gift is less than one percent.

The budget recently passed by the Trustees, which you received on Thursday, projects \$237,500 in income from donations.

If that fit the biblical criteria of a tithe, representing 10%, it would mean that the total income from our entire congregation is just over two million dollars.

I’m not criticizing your generosity and I am particularly pleased we have reached close to 15% of our income being designated for benevolences .

I am grateful for your support of our church.

What I am pointing out is that our relationship to money, over time, has become increasingly self-focused.

What I want you to think about today is your commitment to Jesus Christ.

How do you live out your faith?

Over the past few weeks, as we’ve made our way through Mark’s gospel we have explored the challenges of discipleship.

We have learned that we don’t always like the answers Jesus provides to our questions.

We have learned that when we read the difficult passages in scripture, we find ourselves called to make changes in our own lives.

The good news is that Jesus believes in us – totally.

Jesus comes to us without judgment, knowing that we have the power to transform our lives – to answer his call.

Let’s remember that we gather here each week to worship God who created us and sustains us and to remind ourselves that it is only through God’s grace and love that we exist.

Take time in your life this week to reflect on what you love above all else.

Please join me in reciting our United Church of Christ Statement of Faith that is on the back inside cover of the hymnal:

We believe in you, O God, Eternal Spirit, God of our Savior Jesus Christ and our God, and to your deeds we testify:

You call the worlds into being, create persons in your own image, and set before each one the ways of life and death.

You seek in holy love to save all people from aimlessness and sin.

You judge people and nations by your righteous will declared through prophets and apostles.

In Jesus Christ, the man of Nazareth, our crucified and risen Savior, you have come to us and shared our common lot, conquering sin and death and reconciling the world to yourself.

You bestow upon us your Holy Spirit, creating and renewing the church of Jesus Christ, binding in covenant faithful people of all ages, tongues, and races.

You call us into your church to accept the cost and joy of discipleship, to be your servants in the service of others, to proclaim the gospel to all the world and resist the powers of evil, to share in Christ's baptism and eat at his table, to join him in his passion and victory.

You promise to all who trust you forgiveness of sins and fullness of grace, courage in the struggle for justice and peace, your presence in trial and rejoicing, and eternal life in your realm which has no end.

Blessing and honor, glory and power be unto you.

Amen.

Let us pray.

Eternal God, before whom our human systems and distinctions amount to nothing, and in whose love the last are often first, grant teachings that will astound us, your presence to transform us, and courage to witness with all we have and all we are to the good news of your love and the promise of eternal life.

Hear our prayers this day for those whom we love.

For those who are sick, we pray for healing.

For those who mourn, we pray for comfort.

For those whose lives are shackled by addictions to material things, we pray that they will be freed by your love.

We pray, O God, for our brothers and sisters throughout the world who struggle with poverty, hunger, violence, loneliness and fear. Let our prayers and our resources transform their lives.

We pray for our leaders, that they might be motivated by visions of peace and compassion.

We turn to you now in the sacred silence of this Meetinghouse, with the prayers of our hearts.

Amen.