



November 6, 2005

Luke 12:32-34
Making a Difference
Stewardship Sunday
M. Craig Barnes

In the last couple of months we have watched hurricane after hurricane devastate cities along the gulf coast. The death toll is now over a thousand. Also, an enormous mudslide killed more people in Guatemala than we will ever know. Then, about 80,000 people were killed in the earthquake in Pakistan. It appears that the earth is rising up against us. And now the birds are coming for us. If the fears about a pandemic bird flu materialize, millions could die.

This is not the work of terrorists, criminals, or any evil of human creation. It is simply a harsh reminder that life is fragile. One of our favorite mythologies is that, if we are careful, watch what we eat, get exercise, stop smoking, and use our seatbelts, we can live a long life. But the earth itself has a way of ripping these myths apart.

Life is a fragile thing. Even if you avoid the earthquakes and hurricanes, there are so many other storms of life that can destroy your careful plans. Surely you know that it is only a matter of time before some disease, accident, or evil catches up to you. In the words of Jesus in our text today, what the thief doesn't get, the moth eventually will. So why are you trying so hard to save what you cannot keep anyway?

"But do not be afraid," Jesus says. "You have been given the kingdom." What he means by this is not that his holy angels will protect you from the earth or the terrorist. He doesn't promise to prolong your life. He promises to give you the opportunity to use your fleeting life for something that will endure, something that will make a difference.

Isn't that what we all want? No one who is paying attention can possibly hope to live forever, no matter how careful we are, but we still want our lives to matter. We can't stand the thought that we are just taking up space on the planet, and we cannot even settle for a quiet comfortable life. We want our lives to count and to have impact. We want to have done a good job with life. We want to make a difference.

If you were not interested in the significance of your life, you wouldn't be in church today. Of course, you want to make a difference with your life. "So," Jesus continues, "if you want to be careful, take care as to where you put your treasure. For where your treasure is, there is your heart also." In other words, think about what you are doing with your money. Because it is never just money. It is how we invest our hearts, and thus how we choose to make a difference with life.

This year our stewardship campaign has tried to present the congregation with the ways your financial gifts make an eternal difference in the lives of others. The homeless are given shelter, the hungry are fed, inner city children are given a quality education that admits them to college, and racial reconciliation is occurring between people who are coming to love each other. All of that is

because of your giving to this church. Children and youth in our own congregation are learning how to walk in the Christian way of life, college students are given a church home away from home, and adults are discovering how to worship not only in the splendor of this sanctuary but every day through the devotional life. Again, all because of your giving. The sick and the shut in are visited, the grieving are comforted, the depressed and despairing are given hope. And when the natural disasters occur, through the work of Presbyterian Disaster Relief, this church is able immediately to make a difference. This is the work of the new kingdom Jesus is giving the world, and he is giving it through your contributions.

The opportunities before this church are absolutely incredible. There is no limit to the difference this congregation can make in the city. But whether or not we do that is completely dependent on what you give. There is no other way.

Yes, the church has an endowment. That endowment is a wonderful blessing that helps with the upkeep of this facility. But the endowment cannot and will not carry the church's ministry. The 800,000 dollars we need for ministry and mission can only come from you. Without our giving, all the endowment can do is maintain a nice, empty building.

There is a mythology that this church has some deep pocketed wealthy members who will support it with big checks. Those people are no longer with us. Our biggest givers are now middle class people who give sacrificially to the church because their hearts are invested in this place. Their hearts are invested here because this is how they are making a difference. That can be true for you as well.

The story is told about a fifty dollar bill and a one dollar bill who had each come to the end of their use and were about to be destroyed. The fifty dollar bill said, "I can't complain. From the bank I was given to a couple who took me on their honeymoon to Hawaii. They gave me to a man who took me to Los Angeles, and then I went to New York. From one exchange to another I have been in the finest stores, restaurants, and hotels in the country. I have had a good life." "Oh, not me," said the one dollar bill. "From the day I was created it has been church, church, church."

To be clear, the primary reason the church is asking for more than your charitable dollar, the reason we are asking for you to give sacrificially, is not just because the church has needs, although we do. Nor is it just because the church is now so ready to make a great difference in the community. The main reason we ask you to give is because you need to give. Giving is what you do when you are at your best. It is what you were created to do as a steward of what God has invested in you. It is why you are here, and clearly one of the ways you make a difference.

Where your treasure is, there is your heart also. Those are amazingly prophetic words from Jesus. Do you want to know how you can tell where your heart is? Look at the ledger of your checkbook. It will tell you where your treasure is going and thus how you are investing your heart.

None of us can say, "Look, Jesus and the church have a big piece of my heart, but my money has to go other things right now. The future is uncertain. I had better hang onto as much as possible." "I'm just a student." "I'm just a parent with children to support." "I'm just a retired person living on fixed income." Don't you see? There is never going to be an easy time to give to the work of the church. There is just today, and the opportunity to make it count for the kingdom of God.

Life is short and its length uncertain. Again, something is eventually going to take it away from you. But when you fill out the pledge card you receive this week, you are claiming that you get it. You are claiming that you know how to use your life to make a world of difference.

Benediction: You have to make choices if your life is going to make any difference. And the way you do that is by deciding what you're going to do with what you've got, deciding that today, in the day that you have. Amen.

