

Wesley United Methodist Church
October 13, 2019

Text: Matthew 6:19-24
It's a Wonder-Full Life
Looking In

As a pastor, I have had the experience of conducting many funerals or celebrations of life. They have often included times when people shared stories about the person and what that person meant to them. I have often thought how wonderful it would be if people could hear those stories while they are still alive to hear difference they have made in the life of another person.

Not long ago I had the opportunity to attend a 90th birthday party. During the celebration, there was a time when people did exactly that; shared stories about the person's life. I was so glad that she was getting to hear stories that celebrated her life.

Most of us never really get to know what difference we have made in the lives of others. Some of us may not think that our life has meant a lot or accomplished much. We're just ordinary people, we think – and that may be true. But I believe that most of the difference in our world is made by ordinary people doing things that they think are and ordinary part of their day.

Things like being a parent, a teacher, a grandparent or someone who has inspired another person. Things like being a doctor or nurse or other medical person who may have saved the life of someone. Things like being a fire fighter or police officer and saving a person or making a community safer. Things like being a friend and listening to someone who

needs to talk, or helping someone who needs a ride, a meal, a word of encouragement.

In the movie “It’s a Wonderful Life” George Bailey has come to the point of thinking he should just end his life. Clarence, the angel assigned to him, decides that the thing to do is to help George see how his life has made a difference, by seeing what the world would be like if he had never been born. But first, we see the little everyday things that George did in his life that made a difference; little things that made a person feel valued, saved someone from making a big mistake, provided hope for people.

We see in the movie that there are things that George values that influences how he lives. Our scripture for today, encourages us to look at, and identify the things that we value in life. In a section of what we call The Sermon on the Mount, Jesus tells the people who have gathered to listen to him that they should stop collecting treasures on earth for their own benefit and instead collect treasures in heaven.

He’s not saying, “Don’t worry about this life – instead get ready for the next one”. “Heaven” here means that God is present right here and now and that we need to learn to love and serve God today. If we do that, we will have heavenly treasure that we can enjoy now and also in the future; treasure that isn’t subject to the controls and vulnerabilities of earthly belongings.

Jesus tells them, and us, that the eye is the lamp of the body. What does he mean by this? Tom Wright in the book “Matthew for Everyone” thinks that this involves keeping our eyes fixed on God. Not literally since we can’t actually see God, but keeping our eyes focused on the things of God. We should be careful of what we actually look at. Our eyes are like the headlights of a car. Without headlights, we discover how dark a road

really is at night. So the question is, are our eyes really seeing what God wants us to see, or are we looking in many different directions, without paying attention to the real priorities of life.

On the night when George Bailey was tempted to end his life, it was like he was driving down a dark road without any headlights. He had lost sight of the priorities in his life and could not see what was important.

Jesus is telling us to see the true motivation in our lives, to look at the “why” behind our actions. As Jesus taught, we cannot serve two masters. Eventually they will come into conflict and we will have to decide what our number one priority really is. Jesus teaches us that if God is our number one priority then all of the other really good priorities in our lives will fall into place and make sense.

When George Bailey saw what life would be like without him, he was able to see the bigger picture and to deal with the very real problem that had caused him to temporarily lose hope. He suddenly had a vision of what the world would be like without him.

When we allow anything other than God to become our chief priority it becomes an idol that controls how we spend all of our “gifts” – our time, our energy, our money. “We live an incarnational faith – the belief that, like Jesus, our faith is not just an idea, but it gets lived out in our actions in the world.” We are invited to look at “the courageous vision for our presence and impact in the world.” Can we be courageous enough to really answer questions like: What do we want our lives to mean? How will we live the rest of our lives – however long or short that may be – so that our lives reflect the things we really value?

When we keep asking “why” like children do we are exercising our curiosity about why we really do certain things. We get drawn to the deeper answers under the surface.

For example, some people go shopping or engage in “retail therapy” when they get depressed. If we start asking “why” we do that, we may discover that we are using things to make us feel secure or feel good. If we go deeper and ask what our faith has to say about what really offers the security or happiness that we are seeking, we may discover that we are invited to a spiritual practice like making a gratitude list instead of going shopping.

This may help us start to bring our money practices and our actions into better alignment with our desire to serve God. Even if we aren’t sure that we really want to serve God, we may discover that starting a spiritual practice like keeping a gratitude journal or beginning the day by asking God to help us be more open to the word which God speaks in our daily lives.

At one point this week when I was feeling a little overwhelmed, I came across words from Leonard Cohen’s song “Anthem” that spoke to me. They said, “Ring the bell that can still ring, Forget your perfect offering. There is a crack in everything. That’s how the light gets in.”

Let me explain a little more about how I think these words connect to all this.

There are four key activities related to money. Earning, Spending, Giving, and Storing.ⁱ We all either earn money somehow or we receive the fruits of money that we have earned. Sometimes we need to ask ourselves if the way we earn our money is in alignment with our values, our vision, our life as Christians. We would find it very difficult to be in a place that

requires us to lie or cheat all the time. It is important for us not to do things that truly violate the core of our courageous vision.

We all spend money. We spend money on housing and food and many other things that are essential. But we often don't like to talk about money. Sometimes that's because we judge how others spend their money and we expect them to judge us as well. Some of us spend our food budget on eating out a lot – either in nice restaurants, or quick drive throughs. Some spend their food budget on purchasing frozen foods that get popped into the microwave. Still others spend their money on the ingredients they use to prepare home cooked healthy meals. We all have different reasons for why we do whatever we do and may find ourselves judging others who do it differently than we do.

It can be a challenge – and a good spiritual practice – to ask ourselves if our purchases support our vision of what is important, of how we want to live. Do we make conscious decisions when we spend money or are we impulse shoppers? Do the stores where we spend our money have policies and practices with which we agree? The way we spend our money can be a powerful tool to direct our resources toward the things we truly think are important.

When we start to ask these questions, we may find ourselves overwhelmed with the gap between where we think we are and where we would like to be. That's where the words of Leonard Cohen's "Anthem" speak to me. "Ring the bell that can still ring." Celebrate the good things we are currently doing. "Forget your perfect offering." Probably none of us are doing everything the way God would like us to, but we can offer God one small step at a time. "There is a crack in everything. That's how the light gets in." When we start to ask for God's guidance in the way we earn

and spend our money, we open a small crack and God's light will shine into whatever crack we allow.

Earning and Spending are important activities related to money. Giving is also an important activity. When we think of our vision of life, then our giving becomes a deliberate piece of that vision as well. What are the things that are important to us to support with our giving? Are we giving out of a sense of obligation or does our giving serve our courageous vision? Do we use our giving as a way to try to control someone else or to control a organization? Giving that leads to happiness is generally much more than simply writing a check. It is also donating time and energy.

Like most people, I receive many many requests for me to give to various causes. Some are easy for me to reject - because I disagree with them; but many more fit into the category of worthy and good things that I would like to support.

I know I can't support all of them, so I make careful decisions about where I believe my money will make the most difference. I am grateful to people who make other decisions and support some of the very good causes that I do not support financially.

Yesterday, I received an email that said: Best of Lincoln Awards. It is our pleasure to inform you that Wesley united Methoidst church has been selected for the 2019 Best of Lincoln Awards in the category of Methodist Church. I'm pretty sure that this is a scam or an attempt to get money from me - or the church - and I won't be clicking on the link that was so thoughtfully provided.

But the reality is that I do consider the mission and ministry of Wesley Church to be excellent. Yes, it could be better; but I will ring the bell that can be rung to celebrate what does and what could happen here. So

Wesley Church receives the vast majority of my giving. I will acknowledge that what we offer is not perfect but pray that we continue to move in that direction. I know that God's light shines into and through the cracks and steps that we are taking in sharing God's love and light with our neighbors and with our world.

Finally, we also spend energy storing money. Unless we are hiding our money under a mattress, we are generally putting money into a bank or credit union or other investments. When we do so, we allow someone else to make decisions about how it is spent. Do these institutions use our money in ways that support our vision and our values?

In "It's a Wonderful Life", people putting their money into the Bailey Building and Loan were putting their money into a small community bank committed to helping average people be able to buy homes.

We cannot serve two masters. We cannot serve God and wealth. As we wonder about the ways we make decisions and wonder about how we might do things differently "Ring the bell that can still ring." Begin by offering something and forget about feeling guilty that we cannot do everything. Offer what we are able to while forgetting about our perfect offering. We will be engaged in these four key money activities – earning, spending, giving, and storing – our entire lives.

Aligning these with our courageous vision will be a lifelong practice. At different times in our lives, as conditions change, as our awareness and practices change and grow, our changes may be small, or they may be large. We may make many changes or just a few. But if we pay attention, we will know that our money practices are aligned with our vision, with our service and love of God, as we feel a sense of peace and wholeness instead of negativity and anxiety.

As George Bailey learned, each of our lives touches many other lives. Seeking to bring all of our life into alignment and serving God first rather than trying to serve two masters will make a difference. Because we are all different, we will do this differently. We cannot and should not compare what we do, earn, spend, give, or store with anyone else. Each of us is on a spiritual journey and we are all at different places on that journey. None of us is walking alone but God walks with each of us, guides us, loves us, and invites us to continue to grow into an amazing wonderful fullness of life.

“Ring the bell that can still ring, Forget your perfect offering. There is a crack in everything. That’s how the light gets in.” That’s how God’s light and love gets in.

ⁱ Kulyk, Maggie. Integrating Money and Meaning. Chapter on “Looking In” The following paragraphs on earning, spending, giving and storing contain many ideas and thoughts from this chapter.