

WESTWOOD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH/SEPTEMBER 27, 2009
CHURCH MATTERS: AN INTENTIONAL FAITH/I TIMOTHY 6:6-12
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I. THE TEXT

We continue this morning considering “church matters” – things that matter in the church, that make the church unique. This morning’s matter is godliness – in the church we are those committed to being intentional about who we are becoming, about the pursuit of a transformative faith. We turn our attention to Paul’s letter to young pastor Timothy. Though much of recent scholarship finds Pauline authorship of the letters to Timothy suspect, still, these two letters to a young pastor from an older, wiser mentor have much to offer in our understanding of the nature of church and the nature of faith... in particular this morning, the pursuit of godliness. For tradition’s sake we will call the letter writer Paul. Hear the word of God...

⁶Of course, there is great gain in godliness combined with contentment; ⁷for we brought nothing into the world, so that we can take nothing out of it; ⁸but if we have food and clothing, we will be content with these. ⁹But 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. ¹⁰For 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. ¹¹But as for you, man of God, shun all this; pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance, gentleness. ¹²Fight 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.

II. PRAYER: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight O Lord, for you alone are our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

III. HINSHAW

Godliness... we don’t talk about it much – patience... goodness... compassion, yes. But godliness? That’s something for monks and pastors and Southern Baptists! Godly people are those “holier-than-thou” types who not only have their Bibles memorized but make sure you know it. They are people who ask about your life not because they’re interested, but because they’re looking for flaws to fix.

Perhaps you have read Philip Gulley’s delightful *Harmony* series. They tell the story of a small Quaker fellowship in a small Midwestern town called Harmony. One of Harmony’s most colorful characters is Dale Hinshaw... self proclaimed “godliest man in town.” Two other characters, Sam Gardner and his wife Barbara are relaxing one night on their porch swing.

“I was looking at the calendar,” Barbara said. “I had forgotten that next Sunday is Goal-Setting Sunday.”

Pastor Sam groaned. “Oh, that’s right. I’d forgotten too. I don’t think I’ll go.”

“You have to go,” she reminded him, “You’re the pastor.”

“Then maybe”, Sam responded, “I’ll get lucky and die before then.”

But the Lord didn’t see fit to spare Pastor Sam. Instead, Goal-Setting Sunday gnawed at him the entire week.

That Thursday Sam read the “Twenty-five years Ago this Week” column in the *Harmony Herald*. There was a mention of Dale Hinshaw’s long-ago mission trip. Twenty-five years ago, one of their goals had been the development of “Lawn Mower Evangelism.” Compelled by the Almighty, Dale Hinshaw had ridden across the state on his John Deere lawn tractor. Whenever he passed someone in their yard, Dale would give them a Bible tract and witness to them.

“We just have to throw the seed out there,” Dale [said], “There’s no telling what the Lord can do with it.” “Near as I can figure, I averaged eight miles to the gallon.”

At last year’s Goal-Setting Sunday, Dale Hinshaw had proposed painting *Jesus Saves* on the meetinghouse roof as a witness to people in airplanes. “They’re up there in the wild blue yonder, bucking up and down in the turbulence. The pilot’s telling them to fasten their seat belts. They’ll look out the window and see our roof, and it’ll fix their minds on the eternal. If they’re not open to the Lord then, they never will be.”

Dale Hinshaw’s version of godliness...

IV. THE ANCIENT TEXT

If you’re like me, if godliness means buying a John Deere Tractor or painting *Jesus Saves* on my roof, no thank-you! Yet, we are encouraged to pursue it... to be intentional about growing a faith that transforms us bit-by-bit and day-by-day. Our reaction to the author of 1 Timothy no doubt depends on what our idea of godliness looks like.

When Paul tells Timothy to pursue godliness, it is in contrast with worldliness, a life determined by values forged in a narrow view of life in which we love things and use people rather than the other way around. The Ephesian Christians were not all that different from the church today. They lived their Christian life within a culture whose philosophies about life mirrored our own. “Eat, drink and be merry for tomorrow you die.” “Don’t get mad, get even.” “The one who dies with the most toys wins.” For *Oprah* it is all about staying connected with your “self.” For *Martha Stewart*, ultimate meaning is found in a beautiful home. *Donald Trump* seems convinced that it’s all about stock portfolios and real estate holdings. To be worldly is to buy into these notions as life’s essence. Now, obviously, what makes us worldly is not that we enjoy a sumptuous meal or be self-aware – Jesus did that; it is not that we appreciate our homes – nowhere does the Bible condemn that. It is allowing these things to take center stage in our hearts and allowing them to order our lives – making them what Paul Tillich calls our “ultimate concern.”

The opposite of worldliness is godliness. A godly person is one whose life is increasingly God-centered, God-directed, God-shaped. God offers an alternative perspective on what life is truly about, a challenge to the empty aphorisms that inform our culture. “Don’t get mad, get even?” No, God says, “love your neighbor as yourself.” Is it really, “the one who dies with the most toys wins?” No, the point is to “seek first the kingdom of God.” Does looking out for #1 ultimately work? Our faith claims that life is best when you “love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, soul and strength.” It is this alternative perspective – a God-centered, God-directed, God-shaped perspective that characterizes the life of one who is godly. Godly people are those who increasingly say “yes” to the wisdom and ways of God. It is about a life that goes deep with God... deep enough to risk having God’s ways become our ways.

It is, simply put, a lifestyle informed by God. And, God has something to say about most everything. O.K., God is not so concerned with whether we take our eggs scrambled or sunny side up. But, our marriages, our parenting, our perspectives on health care? God’s got some wisdom for us. Our jobs, our friendships, our checkbooks? God has some expectations. Our health, our time, our politics? God weighs in. In nearly every aspect of life we are confronted with a choice – will we be world-shaped or God-shaped? World-directed or God-directed?

V. PURSUE GODLINESS

Timothy, and we, are told that godliness must be pursued – the writer uses action words: shun, fight, take hold; words of energy and intention... as we unpack the meaning of Scripture – our sacred writing; as we pursue prayer and worship – our inner life with God; as we commit to our faith community – our crucible of transformation and action. Godliness happens as we take on the ways and habits of Jesus the Christ.

The danger for most of us? Not that we will plunge into actually loving money, nor that we will become southern California Dale Hinshaws. Rather, we are more likely to hover somewhere in the middle. An anonymous writer put it this way... “I would like to buy \$3.00 worth of God, please. Not enough to explode my soul or disturb my sleep, but just enough to equal a cup of warm milk or a snooze in the sunshine. I don’t want enough of God to make me love a foreigner, or care for the poor. I want “feel good,” not transformation; I want the warmth of the womb, not a new birth. I want a pound of the eternal in a paper sack. I would like to buy \$3.00 worth of God, please.”

But godliness is not a \$3.00 thing. Paul says it is our life’s most important work. The reality is, we are all pursuing something... this morning’s question is – is what we’re pursuing worth it? Paul put it this way – pursuing worldliness “plunges us into ruin and destruction.” But, “godliness with contentment is great gain.” It is the **far** better way. What we choose to pursue will determine what and who we will become and of what consequence our life will be. The stakes are large.

VI. WORLDLY? GODLY?

History is strewn with examples of people going after what matters most to them – In his book *Success*, Glenn Bland paints a sobering picture of worldly pursuit.

“In 1923 the world’s most successful financiers met at Chicago’s Edgewater Beach Hotel. [like gathering Warren Buffet, Bill Gates, Bernie Madoff] In 1923 these were the financial giants who literally ruled the world of money. They were the “movers and shakers,” the kind that people envy. Yet something went terribly wrong. Twenty-five plus years later: Charles Schwab, president of America’s largest steel company went bankrupt. Samuel Insull, president of the largest utility company died penniless in a foreign land – a fugitive from justice. Howard Hopson, president of the largest gas company went insane. The great wheat speculator Arthur Cutten was insolvent and died abroad. Richard Whitney, president of the New York Stock Exchange did time in Sing-Sing. Albert Fall, Secretary of the Interior in President Harding’s cabinet was pardoned from prison and died at home broke. Jesse Livermore the great “bear” on Wall Street committed suicide. Ivan Kruger head of the world’s greatest monopoly committed suicide. Leon Fraser, president of the Bank of International Settlements committed suicide.

This is no smug celebration of the phenomenally rich getting their comeuppance... rather, these are sad, albeit extreme, examples of what happens when any of us pursues and puts our ultimate faith in something that – when it takes center stage in our hearts – is ultimately empty. These painful stories are not likely to be ours, but they are flesh-and-blood metaphors for any soul who seeks ultimate nourishment from wells that are not the fountain of life.

In God’s world we are given another possibility – the pursuit of godliness. Pastor Tom Schmidt writes about a dear friend of his... Mabel – another bigger-than-life example of a person in pursuit of what they believe matters most.

“The state-run convalescent hospital is not a pleasant place. It is large, understaffed, and overfilled with helpless and lonely people. On the brightest of days it seems dark inside, and it smells of sickness. I went there once or twice a week for four years, but I never wanted to go there, and I always left with a sense of relief. It is not the kind of place one gets used to.

“One Mother’s Day I was walking in a hallway that I had not visited before, looking for someone awake and alert enough to receive a flower and a few words of encouragement.

“As I neared the end of the hallway, I saw an old woman strapped up in a wheelchair. Her empty stare told me that she was blind. The nurse informed me that she was eighty-nine years old and that she had been here, bedridden, blind, nearly deaf, for twenty years. This was Mabel.

“I don’t know why I spoke to her that day – she looked less likely to respond than most of the people I saw in that hallway. But I put a flower in her hand and said, ‘Here is a flower for you. Happy Mother’s Day.’ She held the flower up to her face and tried to smell it, and then she spoke. And much

to my surprise, her words, although somewhat garbled, were obviously produced by a clear mind. She said, “Thank you. It’s lovely. But can I give it to someone else? I can’t see it, you know... I’m blind.”

“It began to dawn on me that this was not an ordinary human being. Mabel and I became friends and I went to see her once or twice a week for the next three years. Her first words to me were usually an offer of hard candy from a tissue box near her bed. Some days I would read to her from the Bible, and often when I would pause she would continue reciting the passage from memory, word-for-word. On other days I would take a book of hymns and sing with her, and she would know all the words of the old songs. For Mabel, these were not merely exercises in memory. She would often stop in mid-hymn and make a brief comment about lyrics she considered particularly relevant to her own situation. I never heard her speak of her loneliness or pain except in the stress she placed on certain lines in certain hymns.

“It was not many weeks before I turned from a sense that I was being helpful to a sense of being helped, to a sense of wonder. One day the question occurred to me, ‘What does Mabel think about – hour after hour, day after day, week after week, not even able to know if it’s day or night?’ So I went in and asked... ‘Mabel, what do you think about when you lie here?’

“And she said, ‘I think about Jesus.’

“I sat there, and thought for a moment about the difficulty, for me, of thinking about Jesus for even five minutes, and I asked, ‘*What* do you *think* about Jesus?’ She replied slowly and deliberately...

“I think about how good he’s been to me. He’s been awfully good to me in my life, you know... I’m one of those kind who’s mostly satisfied... Lots of folks wouldn’t care much for what I think. Lots of folks would think I’m kind of old-fashioned. But I don’t care. I’d rather have Jesus. He’s all the world to me.

“And then Mabel began to sing an old hymn:

Jesus is all the world to me, My life, my joy my all.

He is my strength from day to day, without him I would fall.

Schmidt continues... “This is not fiction... a human being really lived like this. I know. I knew her. *How could she do it?* Seconds ticked and minutes crawled, and so did days and weeks and months and years of pain without human company and without an explanation of why it was all happening – and she lay there and sang hymns. *How could she do it?*”

The answer is this... she’d pursued godliness, godly ways for a lifetime: patient endurance of suffering, solitude, prayer, meditation on Scripture, worship, fellowship when it was possible, giving when she had a flower or piece of candy to offer.ⁱ

Do we pursue, go after godliness... not the Dale Hinshaw variety, but the Mabel version? Do we dare pour ourselves out in the pursuit of a life that will matter rather than a life that will never be enough. Virtually every religion has felt the need to remind us in virtually every age – that in the end of the day it is not the amount of our stuff or the size of our portfolio, but the size of our soul that matters. It is not the ladders we’ve climbed but the people we’ve loved and served. The measure of our life is not what we look like, but how much we look like... and love like God.

Pope Benedict rightly says of the gospel that it “is not meant to be merely “informative” but “performative.” It is supposed to give us more than information: by its nature it is intended to change our lives.”ⁱⁱ We gather here as church community for precisely that – in a world that urges us to forget, we come to be reminded of who we are and why we are here... to be transformed, re-shaped, renewed, in the hope that, as a changed people we will wind up pursuing neither empty promises nor pious platitudes, but renewing our world... as we pray here every single week, that our earth might more resemble heaven.

Amen and amen.

ⁱ As told by J. Ortberg in *The Life You’ve Always Wanted*.

ⁱⁱ *Spe Salvi*, by Pope Benedict, as quoted by Fr. Roger J. Landry at www.catholcity.com/commentary/landry/00605.html