

Sermon: "What Are You Worth?"
First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee, Florida
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THE DEATH CALCULATOR

While in graduate school at the University of Michigan, Dr. David Demko developed a simple quiz that purported to predict the length of a person's life. He gave it a rather unsettling name, "the death calculator." But, despite a bad name this simple instrument has proved remarkably effective and has been used all over the world as a predictor of life expectancy.

There are questions on the quiz like, "Do you have an annual physical exam?" If you do, you get to add three years to your score. If you don't, you are to subtract three years.

"Do you volunteer on a weekly basis?" If so you add two years to your score. If not one year is deducted. "Do you smoke a pack of cigarettes daily?" If so subtract four years. Live or work with smokers? Subtract one year.

Other things that can add years to your life are pet ownership and being a person of faith. Most interesting for me was the fact that left-handed people have to subtract a year.

Why that's true I don't know, but I've been trying to write with my right hand all week! No way is that going to work. I guess I'll just have to resign myself to having one less year.

Recently a popular magazine used Dr. Demko's quiz to determine when popular celebrities would die. Clean living Clay Aiken will live to be 82 while chain-smoking Courtney Love will be out of here at 62.

At least one celebrity has beaten the odds. According to the magazine, Keith Richards of the Rolling Stones should have died in 1995!

Many of us are tying our best to beat the death calculator, resolving to live a cleaner and longer life.

THE LIFE CALCULATOR

But, according to our Scripture lesson, the really important question is not: When are we going to die? In the final analysis, we don't have any control over that. The really important question is: How are we going to live today?

We should not fear death. We should fear living in a way that is without meaning and purpose.

On the winding roads of the West Virginia Turnpike there used to be a sign which read, "DRIVING WHILE DROWSY CAN PUT YOU TO SLEEP—PERMANENTLY!"

That's the function of this story. It's a warning sign, a warning to wake up and notice what is really important.

RICH MAN, POOR MAN

This parable from the gospel of Luke is one of the most powerful and one of the most disturbing stories in the Bible. According to the story, there is a gate that separates a rich man from a poor man.

On one side of the gate is the rich man who lives in luxury. The rich man has everything. He dresses like a king and eats large meals every day in his fine home.

But, on the other side of the gate there sits a poor man named Lazarus. He has nothing. He would love to have the crumbs that fall from the rich man's table. But, he gets nothing but the attention of dogs that come and lick his open wounds.

With whom do you identify in this parable?

Certainly we can't identify with poor Lazarus. Even with the losses that many of us have sustained in three hurricanes we still are able to get something to eat and a place to sleep that is "relatively" dry.

But, surely we're not like the rich man either. We don't have beggars outside our gate, at least most of the time, and none of us live like kings or queens.

In our minds, rich people are those folks who get all the unfair tax breaks. We're the little guy or gal who can't catch a break. We're the middle class caught between the demands of the poor and the privileged lifestyle of the rich. Right?

We may be middle class when compared to others in this country. But, when compared to the rest of the world, we might not be as poor as we think.

This past week I found a website that enabled you to determine just how rich we really are. All you had to do was plug in your annual income, and the program would tell you where you stood in relation to the rest of the world.

I found out that I and probably most of us would rate in the top one or two percent in wealth when compared to the rest of the world!

I don't know about you, but that makes me squirm a bit, especially when I think about this particular parable. I'm happy that Lazarus is in heaven, cradled in the bosom of Abraham. He's suffered enough.

But, did the rich man really deserve such harsh treatment? Did he really deserve the torment of Hades? Most of us are guilty of not noticing someone in need at one time or another. Most of us are guilty of worrying more about whether we eat supper at Red Lobster or the Olive Garden than the needs of the poor at our doorstep.

ECONOMIC FLIP FLOP

As we begin to identify with the rich man we're tempted to try and explain away the harsh message of this parable. Instead of listening to the clear warning of this passage we try to make it say something that it does not say.

Doesn't Jesus know that the economic world is complex that wealth is supposed to trickle down from those who are wealthy to those who are poor? Doesn't Jesus know that charity can be a bad thing, that it can make the poor more dependent on others and unable to help themselves?

Let's not kid ourselves. There are some things that might be uncertain in the Bible. But, when it comes to economics, the Bible is crystal clear. Things get turned upside down in the kingdom of God. The rich are poor. The poor are rich. The world as we know it is changed.

Jesus always had a lot to say about money and God's kingdom. Remember the rich young ruler who wanted to follow Jesus? He had all the right qualifications except for one thing. He couldn't buy into Jesus' views about economics. He couldn't give what he had to the poor.

So, sorrowfully, the rich young man turned his back on Jesus so that he could go back to the lifestyle of the rich and famous.

That's the key. When we turn our back on those in need, we turn our backs on Jesus.

We have to let go of our love of money in order to embrace our Lord.

WHAT ARE WE WORTH?

The title of my sermon is "What are we worth?"

When people ask that question they are usually referring to how much money a person has accumulated. What is he worth? Oh, he's worth several million at least. The value of a person is measured by their net "worth."

But, Jesus suggests through this parable that we might be surprised one day to find a new world in which the value of a person is not tied to income or accomplishments but to God's grace. God values everyone. God thinks that everyone is worth an infinite amount.

But, if that is so, then why does the rich man end up in Hades? Why doesn't God take pity on him? Why can't the gulf between salvation and torment be bridged?

The Scripture suggests that the rich man has made his bed and now he has to lie in it. He has led a life devoted to luxury and wealth, but he has made no provisions for his spirit. At the end of life, his lack of spiritual preparation proves to be his undoing.

VOLUNTARY HELL

I like the way C.S. Lewis portrays hell. It isn't a flaming inferno. Instead it's a dark, chilly and above all boring place.

In Lewis' version of hell its proud citizens can leave any time they choose.

But, they don't leave. Just as they did when they were on earth they choose misery over joy and separation over community. The refrain of everyone in Lewis' hell is this:

"I don't want help. I want to be left alone."

There is always something that the people in hell insist on keeping, even at the price of eternal misery.

Lewis wrote,

"There are only two kinds of people in the end; those who say to God, 'Thy will be done,' and those to whom God says in the end, 'Thy will be done.' All that are in hell chose it."

That's why it's not possible for the rich man to be saved or even warn his family about the error of their ways. They are in their own version of hell even before death.

They are so devoted to maintaining their own way of life and their wealth that they will not be bothered with the message of the prophets. They are so certain that they are right they cannot hear another message.

So it was with the religious leaders of Jesus' Day. Luke describes them as being in love with money. (Luke 16:14) Even when God's own Son, Jesus came and proclaimed the message and even when that message was vindicated by the resurrection, they were blind and deaf to the significance of what was happening.

And even though the rich man finds himself in the self-imposed misery of Hades, he still has the bearing of a person of privilege. The rich man recognizes Lazarus, even across the great divide.

Now we know the rest of the story. The rich man saw him at the gate every day and even knew his name. But, he chose not to notice or help.

According to Middle Eastern custom, what the rich man must do next is clear. He must make an abject apology to Lazarus for how he treated him in life and ask his forgiveness.

But, that's not what the rich man does. Instead, he addresses Abraham. He barks orders across the great divide. "Tell that poor man, Lazarus to bring me some water."

Clarence Jordan in his Cotton Patch Gospel amplifies father Abraham's reply in this way, "Lazarus ain't gonna run no mo errans, rich man."

Things are different in God's kingdom. The poor become rich and the rich are pulled down off of their high horse.

BRIDGING THE CHASM

Don't misunderstand. I'm not saying that the poor are inherently good and the rich are inherently bad.

This parable teaches us that we need to bring down that which divides us, to bridge the chasms which separate us. To do that, we have to see every person as a person of worth in God's eyes and not just as an object to be used for our own purposes.

This, in my mind, is one of the greatest problems of our culture. We are often so self-absorbed that we do not see anything or anyone but our next desire. This is a very lonely way of life and, in the end, a way of living that takes us straight to hell, a hell of our own creation.

I really like the way theologian Jurgen Moltmann puts it. He wrote, "The opposite of poverty is not property. Rather the opposite of both is community."

In other words, we need to notice each other. We need to pay attention to life and the opportunities for service. We need to radically alter our lifestyle and our way of thinking in order to get ourselves in line with the values of God's kingdom.

This will always involve a need to let go of something that we treasure in order to grasp something greater.

THE PURPOSE

For the next few weeks some of us will be discussing Rick Warren's popular book, *The Purpose Driven Life*.

The book is well named. Its central contention is that we are not here to "do our own thing." Life is not all about us and what we want from life.

Life is about God and what God has planned for our life. We have a purpose in life and that purpose comes from God.

Accepting this requires letting go of our own dreams, ambitions and desires in favor of trying to discover what God wants us to do.

For people of privilege, for people who have been told from a very early age, "You can be whatever you want to be. You can do whatever you want to do." this revelation comes as a great shock. Indeed, sometimes we hear this not as good news but as the worst news possible.

And we refuse to accept it.

Yet, when the tough times come, when our own dreams become nightmares, the idea of being in God's hands instead of our own hands becomes a pleasure instead of a pain. The idea that God has a plan for our life that is still in force when our own plans have gone down the drain becomes a great joy and a great hope.

This is God's plan. God has not created us to live by and for ourselves. We were not designed to live in a cocoon of wealth and privilege. We were created to live for and with each other.

The heart of our faith is to have a heart of compassion for the neighbor in need.

GIVE WHAT YOU HAVE

A few years back Kenneth Gible wrote this about the meaning of communion in the Presbyterian Survey.

"When we take the bread of communion in our hands, we hold a symbol of all the basic food produced in our society. Our systems of food production do not distribute food equally; but at the Lord's Table we see that it is God's will that the whole human family have enough bread to eat."

One miracle that is found in all four gospels is the feeding of the five thousand with five loaves of bread and two small fish. Most commentators agree that this miracle prefigures the Lord's Supper.

In that famous story the disciples were quick to point out that five small loaves and two small fish were not enough to feed five thousand people. They urged Jesus to send the crowd away.

But, Jesus said to his disciples, "You give them something to eat. Begin with what you have. Give what you can to your neighbor. I'll make what we have go far enough."

And it happened just as he said.
The Bible tells us that 5,000 ate and were satisfied.

We in Central Florida are suffering from compassion fatigue, as well as just plain fatigue. How many times can we put a tarp on a roof or prepare for the storm?

In some places the water is still rising!

It seems like we don't have enough to get the job done. There is a great temptation to just take care of our own problems and not notice what is going on with others.

This past week I thought,
"How can we take up a collection for Edith's work in Africa the week after a hurricane? We don't have anything left to give."

But, we do. God doesn't call us to give what we don't have. God calls us to take what we have and offer it to Him in faith, knowing that in his hands it will be enough.

Today, as we celebrate World Communion Sunday together, I believe Jesus is calling us to take note of the person in need. Again he urges us,

"You give them something to eat. You don't have to do everything. Just share what you have and I'll do the rest. Remember, all of you are worth a fortune to me."

Amen.