

Suttons Bay Congregational Church
 Wisdom of Solomon 6:12-20

November 6, 2005
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12Wisdom is radiant and unfading, and she is easily discerned by those who love her, and is found by those who seek her. 13She hastens to make herself known to those who desire her. 14One who rises early to seek her will have no difficulty, for she will be found sitting at the gate. 15To fix one's thought on her is perfect understanding, and one who is vigilant on her account will soon be free from care, 16because she goes about seeking those worthy of her, and she graciously appears to them in their paths, and meets them in every thought. 17The beginning of wisdom is the most sincere desire for instruction, and concern for instruction is love of her, 18and love of her is the keeping of her laws, and giving heed to her laws is assurance of immortality, 19and immortality brings one near to God; 20so the desire for wisdom leads to a kingdom.

“Are you going to preach about money?” one of the trustees asked. It sounded like a challenge though I don't think it was meant as such. And in my mind I thought to myself, “Why wouldn't I preach about money?” and many good reasons why a person wouldn't preach about money popped into my mind. Preaching about money could tick someone off. Preaching about money might give a first-time visitor the wrong impression. Preaching about money might seem distasteful or even tacky. Preaching about money might make everyone, including me, feel a little too uncomfortable. Preaching about money might make all of you think that I think that I'm holier than thou. And though those are all fine reasons to not preach about money, I'm throwing caution to the wind and preaching about money today.

I've given you plenty of reasons why a reasonable person wouldn't preach about money, but what are some of the reasons why a person would preach about money. One pretty good reason to preach about money is because, in order for this church to survive, it needs money. The church is growing, programs are expanding, and our staff deserves to be compensated at levels more commensurate with their responsibilities than they currently are. These, in and of themselves would be a pretty good reasons to preach about money—but they're not good enough reasons. You're all intelligent people, you don't need a sermon to help you realize that the church needs money to exist and, beyond just existing, to flourish. And so, though there might be good reasons to do it, I'm not preaching about money as a lesson in the economic realities of the church.

Another good reason to preach about money is that sharing our money is a spiritual discipline. I preach about spiritual disciplines frequently—the spiritual disciplines of prayer, serving others, coming to worship, reading the Bible—all of these are things I mention often in sermons. Giving to the church is also a spiritual discipline—it dates back to the Old Testament when the Israelites gathered up the first fruits of their labors and placed them on the altar of God as a way to say thank you to God for all God had done for them. Preaching about money—or more accurately—the giving away of our money in grateful response to all God has given us—would be yet another sermon in a series on how to be a Christian disciple by practicing the spiritual disciplines. But, I've said similar things in the past. And so, I'm not preaching about money as another lesson in the spiritual disciplines. You've heard that message before and you'll most likely hear it again and so let's not hear it now.

Another good reason, and possibly the most compelling reason, to preach about money is because Jesus did it all the time. Over and over again, Jesus preaches that believers need to give to the poor and impoverished. There's been a whole lot of talk during the past year since our last national election about moral values—abortion, homosexuality, the preservation of the American family—and though these issues are very important to many people—they weren't nearly as important to Jesus as was the issue of money—and more specifically, the need of those who have it to share generously with those

who don't. Surely the response, "because Jesus did it" is as good a reason as any to preach about money. And yet, that's still not why this morning's sermon is about money,

The reason that I'm preaching on money today, on this All Saint's Day celebration, is because you're going to die and so am I. And I'm willing to bet that if I'm there to visit with you as you're drawing your final breaths, if you're like the many other folks I've visited with in their final hours, you're going to ask me to say with you . . .

The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters. He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake. Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me. Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

And as we say it, the sounds of our voices nearly strangled by the pressure of our tears, we'll both know that it's not the end, that our death is but a threshold, a strange new opportunity we always knew we'd have and yet never really believed would come. And there will be a sense of peace at the moment, a recognition, and a letting go. And all of this, because, you knew God's love in Jesus Christ in this world and that makes it so much easier for you and everyone who loves you as you transition from this world into the next. And it may not have happened, you might not know that peace that passes all understanding, had you not been part of a church and come to hear the Good News of Jesus Christ, week in and week out.

And that's why I'm preaching about money—and specifically about giving a significant amount of what of it is ours to the church. Because, when push comes to shove there's no better investment that we can make than to invest in the Church of Jesus Christ. I would hazard to guess that it's the biggest charitable organization on earth. It's hard to imagine where we would be without other charities like the United Way, Good Will, and The Red Cross. And though those groups do great good, churches do the same kinds of things they do and then some. Not only is a church a mission organization that helps us to do just what Jesus told us to—to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, and house the homeless. A church is also an educational institution, a community organization, a social meeting place, and spiritual home. When I listen to the weekly finance program, *Sound Money*, on NPR, I often hear the experts talking about the importance of diversifying one's investment portfolio. I don't know of any other organization or group that does as much as a church does—talk about diversifying your investment! And though a church isn't like the stock market where you get more money back, if things are going your way, more than you've invested—it certainly does provide a sound return on your investment.

And the return is rarely in any kind of physical form, well except in the case of casseroles. We Christians, we're big on casseroles. Not much—really good or really bad—can happen in our lives without casseroles being exchanged. But aside from casseroles, the return is usually of a more spiritual or communal nature. The return is knowing, that no matter how hard the waves of this life are beating you against the shore, there is always hope. The return is knowing that as your kids move away, your parents die, and your old friends grow more distant—you've got a family here who loves you, a family who, if you but ask, will do just about anything for you. The return is the knowledge that this life is not as good as it gets, that it's not the end of the road, the piece de la resistance—rather, whatever that goodness is that we know on earth, whatever our best feeling, or highest high—it's nothing compared to our re-union with God in the Sweet By and By. The return is the comforting and

inspiring words of St. Paul in Scripture—“For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angles nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.” And also, the words we heard read this morning, that in the community of God, we are all one in the spirit—even with those who have gone before—that we are surrounded by “so great a cloud of witnesses.” And these words are familiar to us, these words fill our minds and souls, because of this place, and the others like it from which many of you have come. When we invest in the church—we’re investing in our past, our present, and our future. The church creates a bridge for us from this world to the next, from our corner of the globe to destinations far away, and between each of us, each other, and God.

And because of all of that, because the church is, next to my family, the most important thing in my life, it’s what brings us together into this incredible and inspiring community each week, it’s because of that that I’m preaching about money this morning.