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Westminster Presbyterian Church
Buffalo, New York
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“Distractions”

Luke 12:13-21
1 Timothy 6:17-19

At age 12 Darwin Martin was “slinging soap” for the Larkin company,
going door to door,
knocking, pitching, selling.

The Larkin Company was only a few years old
when Martin starting working for them in 1881,
but the company grew rapidly,
and Darwin - bright, capable, hard-working -
soon found himself in the office in Buffalo
handling the company's bookkeeping,
even though he was still in his teens.

Martin's organizational skills helped the company grow,
expand,
sell more products,
make more money.

By the turn of the century,
Martin was the chief operating officer of the company,
and he was wealthy enough
to hire the renowned architect Frank Lloyd Wright
to design and build his home on Jewett Parkway.

By the mid 1920s,
Darwin Martin was one of the nation's highest-paid executives.
When he retired in 1926,
he hired Wright again,
this time to build a summer home
on a bluff overlooking the lake out in Derby,
a home he and his wife would call Graycliff.

The Great Depression in 1929 hit Martin hard
and he lost virtually all his money.
Where once the Martin family lived in wealth and comfort,
they soon found themselves
having to grow vegetables in their gardens at Graycliff
to feed themselves.
When Darwin died in 1935,
the family could not afford a headstone for his grave.

Since last January, I've spent my days at Graycliff
as interim executive director,
and Darwin Martin's story is with me every day

as I look at his lovely home,
 the home of a successful executive,
 but even more so,
 as I walk through the gardens
 that once fed Darwin, Isabelle, and their family.
 From poverty, to wealth, to poverty;
 up, and then down;
 down so hard.

We Americans measure our success by money,
 and by any measure,
 Darwin was an enormous success,
 at least until 1929.
 In the parlance of today,
 we would say that he was a winner.

But what was he after 1929?

A loser?

I don't think that's a term any follower of Jesus
 should apply to anyone,
 under any circumstances.
 With Jesus, there are no losers.

Still, we are quick to separate those who have money as winners
 and relegate those who don't have money to the losers's circle.
 For us, "money is life's report card",
 as one writer once put it.

And yet, how often does Jesus warn us about money,
 about wealth, about riches -
 not that Jesus says there is anything inherently evil
 or bad about money,
 or wealth,
 or success.

What Jesus warns us of,
 time and time again,
 is that wealth distracts;
 riches, the accumulation of more and more,
 so easily distracts us from the life we are called to as his disciples.
 We chase success, we want more;
 As Ecclesiastes teaches us,
*"Whoever loves money never has enough;
 whoever loves wealth
 is never satisfied with their income."*

(Ecclesiastes 5:10)

It is this love, even the obsession,
 with money, wealth,
 riches, luxury—
 that's what trips us up

The scriptural text that comes to mind does not read:

“money is the root of all evil”;

What the text from the first letter to Timothy says is,

*“For the love of money
 is a root of all kinds of evil,”*

It goes on to say,

*“and in their eagerness to be rich
 some have wandered away from the faith
 and pierced themselves with many pains.”*

(1 Timothy 6:10)

Do you hear the distinction?

The love of money,

the love of more,

the love of riches,

accumulation,

wealth,

that's what distracts us,

turns us from God

as we wander from faith.

That's the essence of our gospel lesson this morning,
 as Jesus tells us the story of two individuals
 who were too preoccupied with money,
 defining themselves by money,
 by possessions,
 by the accumulation of things.

Listen to the text:

Someone in the crowd said to [Jesus],

“Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me.”

But [Jesus] said to him,

“Friend, who set me to be a judge or arbitrator over you?”

And he said to them, “Take care!

Be on your guard against all kinds of greed;

for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.”

Then [Jesus] told them a parable:

“The land of a rich man produced abundantly.

And he thought to himself,

‘What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?’

Then he said, 'I will do this:

*I will pull down my barns and build larger ones,
and there I will store all my grain and my goods.*

And I will say to my soul,

*Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years;
relax, eat, drink, be merry.'*

But God said to him, 'You fool!

This very night your life is being demanded of you.

*And the things you have prepared,
whose will they be?'*

*So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves
but are not rich toward God."*

Do you hear Jesus' warning?

Do you hear what he is saying?

We are to be rich toward God;

or as Jesus puts it elsewhere,

"Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth,

...but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven,

...For where your treasure is,

there your heart will be also."

(Matthew 6:19)

As the lesson Rebecca read tells us,

we are to be, *"rich in good works...*

generous and ready to share"

(1 Timothy 6:17)

This call to be rich in good works

applies not just to us as individuals,

but to us as a church, as well,

as the Body of Christ.

We are to use the blessings we have

to be rich in good works

as we reach out,

use our money, our facilities,

and the gifts of our members

to build the foundation of God's kingdom.

Ours is a proud history;

we've done much good over the years

in the name of Jesus Christ.

But of course,

we must never be satisfied with what we've done in the past;

God is always calling us to new ventures,

new ways of serving,

new ways of sharing our riches.

We have another opportunity that's recently come to us:
 A not-for-profit organization called Belmont Housing
 approached Tom Yorty some months back
 to propose a partnership, Belmont and Westminster,
 to acquire and convert the office building to our south,
 700 Delaware,
 which has stood vacant for quite some time,
 into affordable housing
 for seniors in our community.

Did you know there are more than 25,000 seniors
 who are in need of affordable housing,
 a place that's clean, safe, convenient,
 that provides a sense of community?
 Belmont Housing's mission
 is to provide affordable housing;
 something they've been doing for more than 40 years;
 they've been very successful at it,
 having developed more than 2000 housing units
 over the decades.

Belmont is not asking us to buy the building with them;
 they will buy it, own it, and manage it.
 What they need from us is an investment to help them upfront,
 a large investment, \$100,000.
 The funds would be used to help them
 with all the planning and work that needs to be done
 before any renovation work begins.

There's the possibility that those funds could be spent
 only to find that the conversion won't work,
 can't be done,
 for any of dozens of different reasons.
 We could find that we've spent the \$100,000
 and have no housing to show for it.

But Belmont has been doing this sort of work for 40 years;
 they don't take on projects likely to fail.
 They want this to succeed.
 And if does, both they and we would share a developers' fee
 that would not only return our \$100,000,
 but even more,
 as a profit on our investment.

The MBA in me is always quick to look at the numbers, the risk,
the upside and the downside.

Our investment, while large,
is just 2% of our endowed funds;
we earn that much in interest, dividends
and return about every 4 months.
So even if the project ends up at a dead end,
we'll be okay.

But Jesus, of course, calls me to set aside my MBA hat
and put on my disciple hat.

Jesus calls me to hear him as he reminds me
to be rich in good works,
individually, and as a part of this body of Christ.

Jesus calls me,
you,

each of us,
to live as the apostle Paul tells us
at the end of his letter to the Romans:
*Those of us who are strong and able in the faith
need to step in and lend a hand to those who falter,
and not just do what is most convenient for us.
Strength is for service, not status.
Each one of us needs to look after
the good of the people around us,
asking ourselves, "How can I help?"*

(Romans 15:2, from The Message)

The invitation to the Table that is set before us,
comes from our Lord Jesus

and it is an invitation extended to all:

rich and poor,
old and young,
woman and men,
member, stranger, foreigner;

every one of us invited by Christ

to be fed by Christ,

to be nourished by the Spirit,

for service,

for ministry in the name of Jesus Christ;

each of us fed

and then called to go out boldly, faithfully

to live generous lives,

lives rich in good works;

lives rich in God,

rich in Christ.

So come,
come to this table
come, all God's children
come focused, with no distraction.

And then go from this Table,
fed by our Lord,
nourished by the Spirit,
go out into the world,
*“to share your bread with the hungry
and bring the homeless poor into your house;”*
Go out to live your life rich in good works,
rich in God,
“and then your shall light break forth like the dawn!”
(Isaiah 58:6-8)