

**On Shaking Ground**  
Rev. Curtis Preston

September 30, 2007  
Proper 18 Yr. C  
I Timothy 6:6-19

I know what your thinking. Here we go again, another sermon on money. I can see it in your eyes, I can sense the uncomfortable wiggle in the pews. Mike preached last week, what I personally thought, was an excellent sermon on making a god of riches, and yet, here we are again, talking about the same thing. “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” today’s reading tells us. Ok, we get it. Money is bad and we are bad Christians for needing it, wanting, believing it will make our lives better or easier. Point taken. Can we please move on now? So I’ve got good news and bad news. First the bad news--the issue of money isn’t going away. As long as we keep reading and preaching on the scriptures we are going to continue to confront the issue of money in our lives, if for no other reason than it seemed pretty important to Jesus. After all, Jesus “loved to populate his stories and sayings with references to mammon and money, to offerings and treasuries and taxes, to wages and debts and investments and rewards.”<sup>1</sup> Today’s first lesson from the gospel of Luke, offers a prime example of Jesus talking about money and what it does to us. The rich man isn’t mean to the poor man, he doesn’t treat him badly, he quite simply doesn’t see him. Lazarus is invisible, as are so many of the poor in our culture today. Jesus lived in an age marked by an inequitable distribution of wealth and so he knew that money mattered and that money-talk could be used to speak vividly of the clashing priorities of the culture of God with those of his age. And unfortunately, with regards to the role of wealth in our lives, with the huge disparities between rich and poor, not much has changed.

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<sup>1</sup> John Rollefson, *The Christian Century*, September 21, 2004, p. 20.

Being a Christian means that we are going to have to keep coming back to the issues of wealth, why we want it, how we get it, and what we do with it once it's ours. Being a follow of Jesus means that we don't get to put our wallets and our pocketbooks, our 401ks and our savings accounts safely up on a shelf, contained and separate from our lived experience as Christians in the world.

And now for the good news, today's scripture doesn't say that money is bad, or that we are bad Christians for needing it and wanting it or for believing that having more of it will make our lives easier. Today's lesson on money is complicated. And while our public airwaves and political pundits might not like complicated, personally, I kind of like it. One of the reasons I keep coming back to church, keep praying and reading scripture, is because I know that life is complicated and I want a place where complicated is welcome, where complicated is desired, where easy answers are dismissed as inadequate and where we covenant to be together and wade through all this messiness together.

The author of first Timothy doesn't give us an easy response on what to do about money. In fact, the author offers three separate comments on wealth. The first is that we should be content with what we have, the second is that we should pursue things other than money, and the third of which is that if we are wealthy, if we happen to be wealthy, we should use that money for good, that we should be generous and ready to share.

At the heart of today's lesson is the idea that wealth is not all that it is cracked up to be, that if we make making money our life's goal we are certain to be disappointed and dissatisfied, if not led entirely down the wrong path. The love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. We know this to be true. We all also know that our lives would be fuller, would be richer if we spent more time pursuing righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance and gentleness. We also

know that people who have a lot, should share a lot. None of this is really new information to any of us.

What is difficult about today's passage is that no matter who we are, no matter how much money we have or don't have, today's lesson—echoing Jesus recurring message—is that while money may not be the problem, it most certainly isn't the solution. Today's lesson calls on us to be content with what we have. Now if ever there was a word contradictory to the American mythology of how one finds real life, “content” has got to be it. Think about it—the pursuit of life, liberty and happiness is written into our very constitution, which seems to assume that life, liberty and happiness are things that must be pursued, things that must be attained, that must be chased down and acquired. The gospel, on the other hand tells us just the opposite. The gospel tell us to Stop! Stop. Just stop pursuing. Stop chasing, stop attaining, stop acquiring. And while it may not be good for the economy, learning to be content with what we have is perhaps the only way of ever getting what we really want. “As for those who in the present age are rich,” (that's us the scripture is talking about) “command them not to be haughty, or to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but rather on God who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment.” --not . . . to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but rather on God.

Contentment is not something we hear much about in our culture. How you doing today Bob? O me, just feeling content. How bout you Dave? Yep, content. It's so foreign to our way of thinking that it almost sounds absurd. Trusting that God has provided, is providing not only everything we need, but everything for our enjoyment is extremely difficult. Trusting God is hard, but I am convinced that if we put in the same amount of effort into trusting God, as we do into pursuing everything we are pursuing, God just might surprise us and come through. Individually and culturally we have built our lives on the shifting sands of financial freedom for

so long, to do anything else seems utterly crazy. Which is more difficult, to stop collecting, stop acquiring, stop pursuing and just be content, or is it more difficult maintaining the crazy schedules most of us are keeping?

A few weeks ago, while Danielle was out of town with Lucy and Campbell, I was sitting on the couch enjoying a cup of coffee, admittedly enjoying a quiet morning to myself, when I saw an unfamiliar cat resting on the back of a chair on our screened in porch. Knowing that our cat does not really play well with others, I opened the door to the porch to shoo the cat away. The cat jumped off the chair, ran across the porch and jumped up onto the partially shut screen door, closing it completely. So now the cat is hanging desperately to the screen, meowing and hissing at me. The closer I got the more frightened and upset it got. Then it started running around all crazy, literally bouncing off the walls, jumping and clinging to the screens, tearing things up a little bit. Again it jumped up and clung to the door. So here I am trying to figure out how to get past this crazy cat, so that I can reach the handle of the door that it is hanging onto, so I can open the door and let the cat out.

Now if I'd really been thinking I would have walked away, gone through the house and come around the outside and opened the door from the outside, but of course I wasn't really thinking. All I knew was that I wanted to help this cat get off the porch, but it was acting so crazy, I couldn't help it. Then I said to the cat, (I'm not above speaking out loud to animals) "Simmer down! If you would just calm down a little bit, I can help you. You're making this worse with all your craziness." Well the cat didn't calm down, but I did eventually manage to slip past the cat and fling open the door.

And as I watched the cat scamper across the back yard and over the back fence, I thought to myself. This must be how God feels just about every day. How many times and in how many

ways, have we actually closed the doors which were left open, with all of our crazy running around. How many times have we felt scared, and trapped, and panicked, and so we just start running around crazy, thinking that doing something, doing anything—no matter how out of control or ill conceived, is better than doing nothing. How many times has God whispered in our ear, “if you would just calm down a bit, I can help you. You’re making this worse with all your craziness.”? But instead of listening, all we can hear is our own panicked heartbeat, and so we cling there, hissing and spitting, making it all the more difficult for God to get close enough to us to help us. And those times that we think God has abandoned us there, perhaps God has just gone around the outside to open the door that we have pushed closed. Amen