

## ROOTS AND WINGS

### 2) "Something's Got to Give"

Rev. Ron Dunn

October 16, 2016

You could tell the moment that you saw him. He had that smile, that sure sense of confidence, that winsome way of connecting with other people that brought them into the orbit of his influence whether or not they were even aware of it. He was, by his very nature, a leader, a connector, a mover and a shaker.

Not only did he have this natural God given ability to connect with others, but he also had the kind of upbringing that enabled him to maximize these gifts. His parents had taught him well. He had, as a young man, read and studied the scriptures. He had committed many of them to memory and everyone was amazed by his ability to reference them chapter and verse. He was, without question, a bright and rising star and without question, had a limitless future in front of him. He had it all working for him.

I imagine that Jesus could see and sense this about him as he approached him with a question: **"Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?"** As smooth as he was, Jesus was not about to be drawn in by his flattery. **"Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone."** It was, to be sure, a gentle reprimand, but a reprimand nevertheless.

Jesus then proceeds to reference the importance of being rooted in the basic teachings of the commandments: **"You shall not murder...or commit adultery...or steal...or bear false...or defraud. You shall honor your father and mother."** In my mind's eye, I can see the man putting up his hand to interrupt Jesus' recitation of the commandments. **"Excuse me, but I have been keeping these commandments all my life! I know them inside and out!"**

Then, the writer offers a fascinating little tidbit of information. "Jesus, looking at him, loved him." It's such a brief sentence, such a small observation, but it speaks volumes about the capacity of Jesus to connect at a deeper level with the various people he encountered. They hadn't known each other more than five minutes, but "Jesus, looking at him, loved him."

And it was this love for the man that prompted him to say what, no doubt, was completely unexpected. **"You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me."**

I can imagine the shine in the man's confident eyes suddenly losing its gleam...his ear to ear smile morphing into a grimace and then a frown. It was not what he had expected to hear from Jesus. No doubt, he expected that Jesus would compliment him for his faithfulness and good intentions. No doubt, he expected that Jesus would become yet another one of his many admirers—praising him for all of his impressive gifts. It was, after all, a pattern he was quite used to.

But to his shock and disappointment, Jesus did not do that. Instead, he had the audacity to put his finger on the one thing in his life that was keeping him from the life that he professed to desire—and then, he pressed down hard. He pressed down on the man’s wallet. He pressed down upon his wealth...his sense of security...his need for power and privilege. And you know what? It hurt!

The writer of Mark’s Gospel tells us that in shock and disbelief, the man went away grieving—for he had many possessions. This is the only story in the gospels where an individual actually rejects Jesus’ invitation to follow. Hardly a “feel good” ending, but one, instead, of sadness, loss and a sense of what might have been.

I can’t help but wonder if, in the years to come, this once young man, so full of energy, possibility and promise, would become wistful, looking back and wishing that he had decided differently. I wonder...

In our current sermon series, we are thinking, initially, about the “roots” that we can provide for our children as they grow. We are thinking about the teachings and the values that we can impart that will enable our young people to be nourished by the rich legacy of our faith tradition. Last week, Luke made a strong case for the fact that in many ways—more ways than many may be aware of—we, as a church, are providing the roots that will not only nourish them, but also enable them to stand their ground in the midst of a culture whose values tends to shift like the sand.

This, of course, is no small thing and it is something that we ought to be proud of and something that is worthy of our investment. Through the youth ministries of Luke, now Tawfick and the children’s ministry of Stephanie, we are providing our children and young people with roots—thanks be to God!

It is, of course, from the “root system” of our scripture that we find the nourishment needed not only for the health and wellbeing of our children and our youth, but for our lives as well. And to take this metaphor one step further, I would like to suggest that it is in the teaching of Jesus concerning that we find the “taproot” that nourishes, guides and sustains us.

**I find it not only interesting, but quite important to note that of all the subjects Jesus addressed, he talked about money and possessions more than any other subject—by far!** Why do you suppose that was the case? Jesus understood that one’s attitude toward money (wealth) and how it would be used would go a long way in determining one’s spiritual health and vitality. He understood that one’s allegiance to money can, subtly but certainly, diminish or replace one’s allegiance to God. In fact, the way we use our money can either open or close the door to God.

In this brief encounter, Jesus makes it clear that it is only in learning to let go of what would take the place of God that we can, in fact, let God live at the center of our attention. So, let me ask you: Does God live at the center of your attention? Or, is there something that gets in the way—something that prevents that from happening?

Over the years, I have heard some people get upset with the idea of any message about Christian stewardship. In their minds, if you preach once a year about stewardship, it is one time too many! And if you happen to preach three or four times about stewardship, they may decide to take an extended leave of absence—at least until the series is over! “That’s all you preach about!” they will tell me. While it simply isn’t true, I understand, I think, where they are coming from. They would prefer that preachers don’t preach about money because it might just cause them to think about how their faith is reflected, or not, in the way that they spend their money.

With all due respect, however, I preach about the importance of our stewardship this morning without apology because, you see, this is not a marginal matter in the equation of faith. It is, I believe, a central part of what it means to be a follower of Jesus and this, of course, is reflected in the teaching of Jesus himself.

Stewardship, by its nature, addresses two primary needs: **It addresses the church’s need to receive and our need to give.**

We do a pretty thorough job each year of outlining the needs that we have for funding our ministry. We break it down in various ways, naming the various ministries and programs that your financial support makes possible. We detail the staffing that your gifts make possible and the difference that our staff members make not only in the life of our congregation, but in the greater community. We produce a budget with line items that detail the specifics of our collective ministry and what it takes to run a large organization such as ours. It’s all there in black and white, copied and printed for your review.

There is no question that this church, like any non-profit, largely volunteer organization, depends upon your gifts for its survival. Without those gifts, there is no ministry, no staff, no organization—no church.

But there is another need that I would like to lift up specifically for your attention this morning and it is one that isn’t always so obvious: **It is our need, as human beings, to give.**

I believe, quite simply, that this is the way we are wired. For when we choose to give, we experience a deeper sense of purpose and fulfillment and yes, a deeper sense of joy. It was philosopher, **William James**, who observed that, **“The greatest use of life is to spend it for something that will outlast it.”** It’s true, don’t you think?

It is after we have attended a memorial service that celebrates a person’s life, that we are tempted to ask ourselves, **“What is it that I hope people will say about me at my memorial service?”** Do I hope that they will say that I acquired a great many possessions, that I was able to enjoy the finer things in life and that I managed to satisfy my every pleasure? Or, do I hope that they will say that I gave myself away to a cause that was greater than I, a purpose that stretched me beyond the boundaries of myself and my own little world? The answer, I suspect, for most all of us, is obvious. Stephen Covey suggest that one of our primary purposes in life is to **“leave a lasting legacy.”**

When it comes to the life that we aspire to live, the legacy that we hope to leave, something, deep inside of us has got to give. In his letter to the Corinthians, the Apostle Paul captures this essential understanding with this timeless wisdom: **“The point is this—the one who sows sparingly will reap sparingly, and the one who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.”**

There is, you see, joy in generosity, meaning in the choice to share, purpose in the plan to give of ourselves and our resources for the sake of others. Paul is merely echoing, here, the core teaching of Jesus that it is in losing ourselves—that is, in giving of ourselves for the sake of others—that we find ourselves...that we find the life that we long for and the legacy we hope to leave. Something inside of us has got to give if we are to experience the wholeness and the happiness that gives meaning and purpose to our lives.

Before I leave the story of the rich ruler’s encounter with Jesus, however, I want to make one final observation. This story is sometimes a complete “turn-off” to contemporary readers because the invitation of Jesus is presented in “all or nothing” terms. Go, sell what you have, give the money to the poor and come follow me. That seems to each one of us to be a rather unrealistic request. Are we really expected to give everything we have away in order to follow Jesus?

While there are those who have chosen to do just that, there others who have responded to this invitation differently. Rather than view this as an “all or nothing” invitation, they allow it, instead, to serve as a reminder of the importance of keeping their focus and attention upon God and what God asks of them. They understand that this is not a decision to be made in one dramatic moment, as was the case with the rich ruler, but one that must be made again and again and again as they follow in the footsteps of Jesus.

**I would also want to add, as a final postscript, that this invitation to give that I lift up for your consideration this morning, is not to be confined or limited to the church.**

It would be narrow and short sighted of me to suggest that this church is the only valid recipient of you’re the gifts that you choose to give. The truth, of course, is that it is not. There are many worthy and valid recipients out there—organizations and ministries that are doing significant things to make this world a better place. Rather than see them as the “competition,” I would rather see them as the “allies” that share with us the common cause of working for the greater good of all.

My hope is that, as you consider the many giving choices before you, that you will see in the ministry that we share together the tangible evidence that the Spirit of God is at work in ways that are truly exciting and worthy of our investment and support.

In the lives of our young people, in the lives of our seniors, in small group experiences and various classes we are providing the roots that sustain and nourish, the values that enable us to stand our ground in the midst of shifting sand. In our commitment to outreach and

mission, we are offering the opportunity to be a part of an unfolding vision of compassion, love and hands on service to others that is making a difference in our world.

You would, of course, expect me to have my bias—and I do. But, I can't think of a better investment that anyone of us could make than in the life of this congregation and the future that awaits us. God Spirit is at work within us and we have, before us, the opportunity to share together in this significant work—work that will, in fact, provide our children with “roots and wings,” work that will long outlast each one of us and the short span of our lives.

Something within us has got to give—not because we have to or because we will feel guilty if we don't. No, something has got to give if we want to experience the meaning of the life that we long for...if we want to leave a legacy that will truly outlast us.

That is something that the rich ruler never quite understood and why it was that he turned away grieving from the invitation of Jesus. He simply could not grasp the idea that it is in giving that we truly receive everything that we could ever hope for. Amen!