Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

Sermon Series: Follow the Leader

The Truth About Treasure — Study #5

(Luke 12:13-34)

Introduction: "Jabberwocky" economics…

This past week, US Treasury Secretary Timothy Geithner unveiled his plans for dealing with the troubled American economy. Like you, I had been hearing about the plan for some weeks and was eager to find out the plan's details.

I was excited when, on Monday morning, I opened up the Wall Street Journal to find an article titled, "My Plan for Bad Bank Assets" - by Timothy Geithner himself!! (I've heard the term "bad bank assets" bandied about - and who wants bad bank assets? Yucch.)

I eagerly read his article. Then I read it again. I read it a third time. Each time through, I got to a certain part of the piece and stalled out. Here's the part of the article that "got me." See if it gets you.

> "The Public-Private Investment Program will purchase real-estate related loans from banks and securities from the broader markets. Banks will have the ability to sell pools of loans to dedicated funds, and investors will compete to have the ability to participate in those funds and take advantage of the financing provided by the government. The funds established under this program will have three essential design features. First, they will use government resources in the form of capital from the Treasury, and financing from the FDIC and Federal Reserve, to mobilize capital from private investors. Second, the Public-Private Investment Program will ensure that private-sector participants share the risks alongside the taxpayer, and that the taxpayer shares in the profits from these investments. Third, private-sector purchasers will establish the value of the loans and securities purchased under the program, which will protect the government from overpaying for these assets."

Try as I might, I couldn't get past this middle part of the article where Mr. Geithner explained the guts of his plan. I just don't get it.

Reading the plan's details is like reading Lewis Carroll's nonsense poem, "Jabberwocky" which includes those memorable lines -

> 'Twas brillig, and
> the slithy toves
> Did gyre and gimble in the wabe;
> All mimsy were the borogoves,
> And the mome raths outgrabe.

The sentence structure is fine. It's the words that stump me.

I'm not faulting Timothy Geithner for my lack or understanding or even accusing him of being unclear. Macro-economics is not my forte, so it's not surprising that I don't "get it."

Many of us who "get" the basic concepts of "micro (or home) economics" don't understand the "macro-economy." And most Americans will admit to some confusion about the solutions now being proposed for dealing with our.

But by contrast, when Jesus talks about money, we "get it." He speaks in such a way that I (even I!) can wrap my head around it. Jesus' lessons in economics are as SIMPLE as they are utterly COMPELLING!

Over the past four Sundays, our focus has been on "following our Leader", Jesus. We've seen that when we follow Him He will reliably lead us into worship, community, witness and rest.

This morning our Leader gives a crash course in "Kingdom Economics, 101" and leads us into lives marked by generosity.

When we catch up to Jesus, He's in teaching mode. He's mainly teaching His disciples, but others are listening. Lots of others.

He has been telling His followers that they are to be bold witnesses for Him, regardless of the danger or the suffering they are forced to endure.

Just at this point, someone in the crowd pipes up with a personal issue he wants Jesus to resolve.

<u>Greed - Words to the Wise (12: 13-21)</u>

A Heated Exchange (vv. 13-14)

A (seemingly) innocent request (v. 13)

[13] Someone in the crowd said to Him, "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me."

The situation is likely that of a younger brother whose older brother refused to give him his share of their father's inheritance.

It was common in Jesus' day for heirs to live together. This way, the father's inheritance was kept intact, and this is probably what the older brother wanted to do.

But the younger brother (the one who is asking for Jesus' intervention) wants to receive his share!

People who had these kinds of disputes typically went to the rabbis for arbitration and this man addressed Jesus, perhaps thinking to honor Him by treating Him as an authoritative rabbi.

If Jesus had simply wanted to be known as a reliable judge, this would have been a golden opportunity. He could take charge and make a ruling. But that is not at all what He did.

A (seemingly) curt response (v. 14)

[14] But He said to him, "Man, who appointed Me a judge or arbitrator over you?"

He flatly refused to get involved!

It's certainly not that Jesus was not qualified to serve as an arbitrator. He was super-qualified - over-qualified! - to serve in this capacity.

But Jesus came to fulfill a more important mission than settling family squabbles.

He did, however, turn the man's request into a teaching moment for the entire crowd because He detected a problem in the request itself.

There was something troubling about the way the question was framed. Or maybe it was in the tone of voice. Whatever it was, Jesus picked up on greed.

"…and he did NOT live happily ever after" (vv. 15-20)

Life ≠ possessions (v. 15)

[15] Then He said to them, "Beware, and be on your guard against every form of greed; for not even when one has an abundance does his life consist of his possessions."

Jesus pictures greed as an invading army - or better, as a slinking, lurking thief whose sole aim is to gain an advantage. Watch out! Keep your guard up! Don't fall for the temptation to want more and more and more.

That's what greed is - an insatiable appetite for more. More than we currently have; more than we need; more than our friend has; more than God has provided.

And then did you catch Jesus' last comment? He says that even if we have an abundance of material possessions, our life does not consist of those possessions.

Interesting that He would put it this way…

Jesus seems to be saying that you and I are more drawn to think that life consists of possessions when we have a lot of possessions.

Our vocabulary (appropriate when talking about strictly financial matters) can lead to this way of thinking. We will sometimes use the term "net worth" as in, *"What's she worth?"* or *"What's he worth?"*[1]

Does Bill Gates' wealth define him more than your wealth defines you? Is a poor person's life more defined by happiness, friendships, family, and health than a rich person's life? (and if so, who is richer, the wealthy or the poor?)

Jesus says that for either category - rich or poor - LIFE consists of so much more than possessions. And He goes on to tell a story to illustrate the foolishness of defining wealth as LIFE.

Illustrated in living color (vv. 16-20)

[16] And He told them a parable, saying, "The land of a rich man was very productive. [17] And he began reasoning to himself, saying, 'What shall I do, since I have no place to store my crops?' [18] Then he said, 'This is what I will do: I will tear down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. [19] And I will say to my soul, "Soul, you have many goods laid up for many years to come; take your ease, eat, drink and be merry."'

The man in view in the story is wealthy. Jesus says he has ***"barnS"*** - note the plural! His problem - if you can call it a problem - is that he has insufficient room to store his anticipated bumper harvests.

So, assuming that his very productive land will keep producing, he makes plans to tear down his current, too-small barns so that he can build new and improved LARGER barns.

His dream is to relax and enjoy his wealth for years and years to come. He'll have a comfortable retirement. His idea is to take it easy and live the good life.

[1] Of course we mean by this the total, in terms of dollars, after all of a person's liabilities are subtracted from his or her assets. Of course, it would be ridiculous to value a person on the basis of how many dollars he or she has. But Jesus knows (and we do, too), that it is tempting to value people on the basis of their "net worth."

Note God's assessment of his plan:

[20] But God said to him, 'You fool! This very night your soul is required of you; and now who will own what you have prepared?'"

In God's eyes the man's plan was foolish because it failed to take into account the fleeting nature of earthly riches AND ignored the importance of investing in permanent riches.

Lots of people across our country and in our city and here in our church have recently tasted the fleeting nature of earthly riches. Lots of retirements have been re-calculated over the past eighteen months. And those who have put all their long-term investment eggs in the stock market basket are discovering that Jesus is a genius.

As He wraps up this parable, He includes this zinger:

[21] "So is the man who stores up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God." (To be ***"rich toward God"*** probably means about the same thing as ***"laying up treasure for yourself in Heaven"*** as Matthew 6:20 says it).

Is there anything wrong with having a comfortable retirement? No. Is there anything wrong with having a healthy savings account? No.

But there is everything wrong with having a huge stockpile of money and possessions for the very, very short-term purpose of end-of-life retirement WITHOUT giving consideration to the eternal long-term purpose of God and His kingdom!

You don't have to read very much into this parable to see that the wealthy man was selfishly planning to enjoy his riches without any thought given to needy neighbors and no concern about investing in God's kingdom purposes. His wealth was all for the latter years of HIS life and was to be devoted all for HIS enjoyment.

See, when it comes to Kingdom Economics, the critical question is whether or not God IS. If God exists and if eternity is real, then it is clearly foolish for us to have all of our wealth stockpiled **here**.

<u>Point:</u> Wisdom says we should invest for the long term. If God and eternity are real, the long term is REALLY long term!

Greed is certainly one of the great dangers that could derail any of us from spiritual vitality. It's so easy to get wrapped up in materialism while living in an extremely materialistic world!

But there is another equally dangerous malady to which any of us could fall victim in addition to greed. I'm thinking about worry.

As Jesus continues speaking He turns His attention more directly to His disciples and speaks about worry.

<u>Worry - Advice to the Alert (12:22-32)</u>

Don't Buy the Commercials!! (vv. 22-23)

[22] And He said to His disciples, "For this reason I say to you,[2] do not worry about your life, as to what you will eat; nor for your body, as to what you will put on. [23] For life is more than food, and the body more than clothing.

You would never arrive at Jesus' perspective by watching an evening of television! Wouldn't you guess that a HUGE percentage of marketing dollars are spent to produce commercials that try to sell us food (or drink) or clothing?

The overwhelmingly clear message that bombards us through countless advertisements every day is that life IS food and the body IS all about clothing!

Jesus, though, says that life is about so much more than these things.

Life is about wonderful friendships. Life is about nurturing family ties. Life is about serving and worshipping God.

And because life is so BIG, we shouldn't worry about such LITTLE things as food and clothing.

After all, birds don't.

Natural Lessons (vv. 24-28)

Birds are great teachers (vv. 24-26)

[24] "Consider the ravens, for they neither sow nor reap; they have no storeroom nor barn, and yet God feeds them; how much more valuable you are than the birds! [25] And which of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life's span? [26] If then you cannot do even a very little thing, why do you worry about other matters?

Every week, men and women come by our church hoping to receive some food. Thanks to your generosity, we are able to load them up with groceries. But prior to coming by the church, most of these folks didn't know where their next meal is coming from.

And there are billions of people around the world who are at least as desperate for food as these hungry San Antonians who come by. When Jesus spoke these words, some of the people He was talking to were very desperate.

His advice? *"Chill." "Don't worry."*

And the reason they are not to worry is because God knows their needs and God cares.

After all, God knows about the needs birds have for food. And birds, generally speaking, do just fine living paycheck to paycheck. Jesus says, *"You don't have to fret, either."*

And then look at the flowers.

Flowers are great teachers (vv. 27-28)

[27] "Consider the ~~bluebonnets~~ lilies, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin; but I tell you, not even Solomon in all his glory clothed himself like one of these.

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[2] Jesus intends a tie-in between greed and worry as is evident from "for this reason."

[28] But if God so clothes the grass in the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the furnace, how much more will He clothe you? You men of little faith!

Traveling to Russia over eight years to teach men and women who were preparing for Christian ministry taught me a lot about all kinds of things - including fashion.

Before going over, I always gave attention to the clothes I would take. I wanted to honor the students by looking nice. Teachers were required to dress up. So I took a few shirts, sweaters, a sports coat, three or four ties.

The students in the classes, though, while dressing as nice as they could, for the most part wore the same clothes day in and day out for the two weeks I was with them, except for the rare change of shirt. They wore what they had.

There are plenty of people in our world who have no clothing other than the clothes on their backs.

Jesus points out the flowers - He mentions lilies in particular - that do nothing but bloom. They are clothed in spectacular beauty. On this spring day, fields in south Texas are covered with bluebonnets after the beneficial rains.

Jesus says that if God covers flowers with such wonderful clothing, can't he be trusted to provide you with what you need to wear?

Worrying doesn't do one bit of good. We are prone to worry, but it's pointless. Instead, we are to trust God.

Kingdom-Seekers win over Greed/Worry (vv. 29-32)

[29] "And do not seek what you will eat and what you will drink, and do not keep worrying. [30] For all these things the nations of the world eagerly seek; but your Father knows that you need these things. [31] But seek His kingdom, and these things will be added to you.

[32] Do not be afraid, little flock,[3] for your Father has chosen gladly to give you the kingdom.

Here are three great reasons to not worry.

- First, don't worry because that's the kind of thing people do who don't know God. You DO know Him, so worrying is a contradiction of who you are - a child of God
- **Second**, don't worry because if we will just give our attention to His kingdom, God will see to it that we get the food and clothing and drink and shelter that we need![4]
- **Third**, don't worry about the "necessities" of life because you have already received something that is more important than anything this life can offer - the Kingdom of God!

We who have been given the kingdom (in actuality, we have already received it to a certain extent; in the future, we will receive it fully) are free to have a completely different perspective on wealth/earthly treasure.

So, here is Kingdom Economics 101, thus far:

GREED is off-limits. The prescribed route to avoid greed is to be rich toward God (lay up treasure in Heaven). WORRY is disallowed, too. The medicine to keep us from worry is a robust trust in God.

In other words, the key to victory over greed and worry is all wrapped up in being all wrapped up in God.

And how do we arrive at being all about wrapped up in God?

Listen.

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[3] Little flock - speaks of weakness and vulnerability; on the other hand, it is God's flock, so it is protected.

[4] Marshall is quick to add that the full provision of material needs is the normal situation for disciples. But he also notes that this cannot be pressed to mean that man's life is always secured by God. Only that uncertainty need not cause anxiety.

The Anti-Greed/-Worry Prescription (12:33-34)

Give…[5]

[33] Sell your possessions and give to charity; make yourselves money belts which do not wear out, an unfailing treasure in heaven, where no thief comes near nor moth destroys.[6]

…and your money will bless people

I'll be the first to admit that I don't really understand TARP, the Federal Reserve, "bad bank assets", the bailout, arbitrage, hedge funds, the stimulus bill and countless other economic concepts.

But I can understand Jesus' economics! It is as clear as a bell.

All the plans you will hear being proposed for our economy are designed to bring **prosperity** and **stability** and **security** to our country.

Similarly, Jesus' economic plan is designed to **prosper your soul;** it is designed to bring **peace** and **stability** to your anxious heart; it is designed to bring you **security** as He rescues you from greed.

His advice for a sure-fire way to enter the God-centered life we dream to enjoy is to give generously.

As we prepare to close this morning, I want to line out for you some ways to put Jesus' words into shoe leather. Some very practical ways to apply Kingdom Economics, today, and throughout this week.

- YOUTH GARAGE SALE

I know that a lot of you have already made donations to the youth garage sale scheduled for next weekend. It is exciting to see the storage shed getting fuller and fuller by the day.

Next Saturday morning our church will be filled with people looking to get good buys on your donated treasure. The money raised will help fund trips youth from our church are taking this summer to New Orleans, to Morocco, and to Jerusalem.

Today is the last day to make donations to the garage sale.

What do you say to the idea of making one last trip through your apartment or home, your garage, or your shed this afternoon to find a few more items that will bless someone looking for a bargain and even more importantly, help fund one of the most exciting ventures into Missions our church has pursued for youth in years?

- YOUTH SUMMER MISSIONS TRIPS

On the same theme of the summer missions trips, have you considered making a financial donation to support these trips?

There are seventeen youth and adult sponsors traveling on these ventures. The costs associated with getting them to their locations, supporting them while they are in country, and getting them back are substantial.

Each team member will soon be purchasing their plane ticket (except for the New Orleans team who will be driving), and ticket prices are hovering around $1,500.

They are each buying their own tickets and are hoping that **YOU AND I** will stand behind them. It is my hope and prayer that each youth and adult sponsor will be fully re-imbursed for all the expenses associated with these trips as our way of saying, *"We're with you all the way!"*

If you have not yet given toward this exciting venture, will you prayerfully consider giving toward it over the next few weeks?

- BENEVOLENCE FUND

And here's another way to apply Jesus' words about giving: our Benevolence Fund.

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[5] Note that Matthew has "storing up treasure" before the example of the birds and the flowers. Luke places it after. Marshall regards the order of Luke to be the original and most logical.

[6] Matthew's wording (Matthew 6:19-20) is almost poetic. Luke's is not.

The Benevolence Fund is a special fund of money, resourced by YOU (not a budget item) that is used to help people in desperate straits.

Over the past several months, thousands of dollars have been given to people in our church and in the community at large from the Benevolence Fund.

However, donations are decreasing as needs are increasing. I had to say "No" to six requests for funds on Tuesday of this week because there was no money in the Benevolence Fund.

Would you consider making the Benevolence Fund a regular part of your monthly giving?

- FOOD PANTRY

Then, consider the church's Food Pantry. You've heard Rhonda Olson explain the Food Pantry's operations in recent weeks. One change that she and her ministry team are implementing is to ask that the congregation bring in donations to the Food Pantry at the beginning of each month.

This change is starting in April, so she is requesting that you bring in your monthly donation to the Food Pantry beginning Friday of this week during office hours or next Sunday morning, April 5th.

But please give to the Food Pantry! People drop by our church needing food, often because someone has told them that our policy is to say "Yes" when we have food. Your donations make it possible to continue to say "Yes."

- GENERAL FUND OF THE CHURCH

Of course, the church's General Fund is important and I want to encourage all of you to be generous to give toward the regular needs of our church. Lots of ministry goes on here, week in and week out, and generosity multiplies ministry.

But I also want to commend you for the outpouring of generosity we've seen in recent months. The level of giving that has been coming in is what has given us the freedom to consider paying off the mortgage and hiring ministry staff.

In addition to blessing others when you use the drainplug of giving to battle greed and worry, you will find great blessing coming your way, too.

…and you will be blessed

Giving is the way to ***[33]… make yourselves money belts which do not wear out, an unfailing treasure in heaven, where no thief comes near nor moth destroys.***

Earthly treasures are, by definition, only beneficial for this life. After this life is over, everything you and I have accumulated will not benefit us.

The things we accumulate and think are ours are so prone to loss. Moth, rust, fire, theft, market meltdowns, poor decisions, and loss of a job can all destroy the treasures we have saved.

But real long-term saving - investing in people for the sake of God's Kingdom - cannot be lost!

Jesus ends this economics lesson with a proverb that is so startling we may have to read it twice.

…because the Heart Follows the Wallet (v. 34)

[34] For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

How counter to the way we so often think![7]

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[7] I. Howard Marshall says in his commentary - "If a person seeks such heavenly treasure, the implication is that his heart (affections) is directed in the right way, whereas if a person piles up earthly treasure, the evidence shows that his affections are earthbound and hence his heart is not truly related to God. Hence the saying provides a motive for the command, by showing that the person who continues to hold on to earthly wealth and does not fulfill the command (v. 33) is not really seeking after the kingdom of God. The two attitudes are mutually exclusive." This seems to me to exactly miss the point. Marshall says that giving is an indicator of

Jesus' wording is so surprising that I've even heard Him misquoted. *"Where your heart is, there will your treasure be also."*

Makes sense - but that is not what He says. He says that our heart will follow our wallet. If may be true that giving INDICATES spiritual health. But here He says that giving DETERMINES spiritual health!

Jesus is saying that if we want to have hearts that beat with God's heart, we will sell our possessions, give to charity - because our hearts will follow our wallets.

National or global economics are confusing. Kingdom of God economics are not!

The plain things are the main things and the main things are the plain things. And the main thing about Kingdom Economics is that a God-centered focus will dissipate worry and will deliver us from greed.

The first step toward that God-centered life is a conscious, deliberate decision to give.

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the heart's posture toward God. While as much as that may be true, what Jesus is saying HERE is that giving is a determiner of the heart's posture toward God.