

Take Hold of Life
A Sermon by Louise Westfall
Fairmount Presbyterian Church
Cleveland Heights, Ohio
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Text: I Timothy 6:6-19

Research reported this week reveals a twist on Tolstoy's observation that "all happy families are the same." Two independent studies seem to point to a growing "happiness gap" between men and women. In the early 1970s, women reported being slightly happier than men. Today the two have switched places. According to research surveys, men are actually spending less time at their jobs, whereas women are spending more time on paid work and less on domestic chores (for example, the study actually measured the amount of time devoted to dusting, which has seen a precipitous decline in recent decades). A young woman who is a recent business school graduate offered this explanation, "My mother's goals in life were to have a beautiful garden, a well-kept house, and well-adjusted children who did well in school. I sort of want those things, too, but I also want to have a great career and have an impact on the broader world." The phenomenon even showed up in high school-aged youth—boys reporting satisfaction with their lives at a ten percent higher rate than girls. [*The New York Times, September 26, 2007*]

Whatever you make of this research (which at the very least seems to suggest we're all living with a lot more dust than we used to), it illustrates the unanimous desire for happiness, to live lives that are personally fulfilling. It also suggests that we haven't figured out the formula yet; the perfect balance of work and play and fiber to concoct our best life now.

The morning Scripture text adds advice from the spiritual realm by exhorting us to "take hold of the life that really is life." Here the seasoned apostle Paul, perhaps a bit weary and worldly-wise, writes to young Timothy, so fresh and eager, about how to do that. As we read it, bring to your mind the ingredients you would mix into a recipe for the good life. Listen for God's word in the reading from

the first letter of Paul to Timothy, in the sixth chapter, at the sixth verse.

[I TIMOTHY 6:6-19]

It's begun. The landslide that daily overfills my mailbox and threatens to obliterate my desk at home. You know what I mean: the annual inundation of catalogs. Clothing, home furnishings, electronics, jewelry, books, tchochkes...every manner of thing for sale. The sheer volume is annoying, but this year, I've also found myself increasingly impatient with the message of these marketing magazines: *You are not happy. You are not enough. You are not having your best life now. Look at the people on these pages. See that woman striding confidently on the trail in her 100% supima cotton, soft knit, breathable, fade and pill-resistant t-shirt and lightweight twill hiking shorts with just a touch of stretch for comfort; see how her companion is looking at her with admiration and affection. She's got it all, and you don't-- until you buy what we are selling.* Happiness is achievable only with the right product. Ironically, even spirituality gets promoted as one more "thing" to consume. Simply digest this book, absorb this video and you will become healed, whole and happy.

What makes for good marketing (I own that outfit!!!!) may be less satisfactory as an ingredient for a good life. The apostle Paul had another idea and at first reading it sounds mainly like a rejection of money and materialism. This text is probably the most well-known of all biblical perspectives on money, though it is often misquoted as "Money is the root of all evil." You heard it correctly in the text as "the *love* of money is *a* root of all kinds of evil." A subtle, but significant, distinction. Money in and of itself is morally neutral, and of course a necessary and useful part of living. We know that money can't buy happiness (though I've heard it said that it surely makes misery more comfortable!). And certainly there is plenty of evidence in the opposite direction: the *lack* of money is a root of evil in the form of human suffering and oppression, poverty, and hopelessness. And yet the apostle felt it important to speak at length about the potential problem of wealth for those who strive for it and for those who possess it.

Recently I saw a profile of a number of upper middle class Americans who have “downshifted” their lifestyles. They have chosen to buy and earn less—to give up income, and get off the fast track for more free time and lowered stress levels. While they represent a small percentage of the population, they appear to be acting upon an attitude shared by 82% of Americans, according to a summer poll; namely, that *we buy and consume far more than we need*. One woman interviewed described the moment five years ago when she decided to give up a successful real estate career: “I was sitting at my desk, my schedule full of phone calls, appointments and meetings—and I realized this was just not what I wanted to do. I think many of us have reached the point of despair. We’re tired of these complex lives and never having time...I think the despair is coming from our souls.” Added a former Wall Street analyst who now lives on a yearly \$6000 budget in the Pacific Northwest: “I got the brass ring, and damn if it didn’t taste just like brass.”

Money is not a value-free commodity. Our decisions about money reflect our priorities and deepest commitments. Money can be a blessing or a curse. We can use it to bless or curse as well. And maybe that’s why the Bible talks so much about money—and warns that it is not the most important ingredient of a fulfilling, joyful life. In this text, we’re warned about the way the pursuit of wealth can imprison us in a never-ending cycle of getting and wanting, wanting and getting—while in the meantime, we miss the true riches. One way to be rich is to want less, to understand the lure of things as a hunger that things cannot possibly fulfill. We can break the cycle if we understand what the hunger really is....a deep, inborn yearning for significance, for meaning, for the life that really is life.

The apostle makes a play on words to assure Timothy that there is profit in the life of faith, but it will come in non-material forms. Contentment, for example. Joy. Peace, even in the awareness that life is short. You can’t take it with you. There are no pockets in a shroud.

But I can’t quite put this text to bed. Something’s still bothering me. There’s nothing new here—you already know that money and “things” are inadequate as the foundation for a fulfilling life. Does

this text—or Christian faith itself—add any insight to our pursuit of the good life?

Puzzling over that, I decided to seek the perspective of a young adult—one who has had good parenting, superior education, not to mention being forced to listen to his mother’s sermons for about 25 years now. I called him up, briefly summarized the text, and then put the question to him, “So what do you say? How do you think one should build a satisfying life?” He paused only a moment before responding (a little loudly in my opinion) “Fake it!” Fake it??!!

And then it struck me: don’t we all fake it sometimes? We adhere to our formulas, stick to the known routes, play by the rules, and out of nowhere, life hits us with something unexpected. Most days we live our busy lives and we may feel lucky...or blessed, but we’re also aware of so much over which we have no control. I wonder what you are imagining the good life is if you happen to be sitting here this morning grieving a fresh loss....or with a nonspecific ache in your spirit from which you are never quite free...or if you are a victim of circumstance: the scapegoat; the draw-er of the short straw; in the wrong place at the wrong time....or if you are gripped with anxiety or filled with fears about tomorrow. I’m thinking you might have had to fake it a little to put on a smile and come to church. I think it because I am all too familiar with the times when I doubt or question the brave things I proclaim; when my confidence is shaken in my own abilities as a pastor, as a woman; or when I awaken early, early and worry what I might have done differently with my life.

Friends, the good life does not depend—cannot depend—upon any external thing: not the most prestigious job, not the smartest kids, not the latest toy, not the insights of the best-selling guru. To set one’s hope on these contingent things will prove insufficient sooner or later. Paul reminds Timothy that the life that is really life involves a choice—but not just any choice. We’re inundated with choices. It is choosing to live the life to which God calls you; to become who you were created to become. The good life is the life of faith, in which love is actively demonstrated as the most important thing, “keeping the commandment” as the text puts it: to

love God and one another. “Take hold of life” –it’s not a passive acceptance of belief—even in God---it’s a forceful, dynamic engagement with good; a vigorous pursuit of righteous living—even a “fight.” Paul is never one to sugarcoat the truth. To take hold of the life that really is life may involve struggle, going against the current, walking the road less traveled.

What we have control over is the choice of paths – the way we’ll walk. We can’t know what awaits us on that path, what challenges we’ll face, what unexpected situations will arise, what opportunities we’ll confront. The warnings about wealth become pointed questions about our choice of paths. Are you choosing with eyes wide open? Is the choice your own, or is it one imposed upon you by marketers, through peer pressure or the whims of culture? Are you controlled largely by inner fears and anxiety that make you crave security and worship what can be seen and counted and amassed? Jesus said it another way, “Seek first the Kingdom of God and God’s justice and everything else will find its place.” Get on the right path, and you will walk securely, with purpose and joy, come what may.

Harvard chaplain and professor Peter Gomes has distilled thirty years of work with “the best and the brightest” into a book called “The Good Life.” He exposes the “plausible lies” our culture tells us about how to find it, and draws from the Bible and from classical theology a more reliable way. He quotes St. Augustine from a sermon on Psalm 32: *You want to be better off: I know it, we all know it, we all want the same thing. Look for what is better than yourself, so that by that means you may become better off than you are.* How can we build the good life? Set your sights higher than human life. Don’t settle for what you can see. Look to the One who is the only Ruler, the King of Kings and Lord of lords whom no one has ever seen or can see. God alone is worthy of our ultimate trust, the foundation for a life that really is life.

That’s why I’m always just a little bit suspicious of the book store section entitled “self help.” If our salvation finally depends upon ourselves, God help us. Yeah, that’s right. GOD help us. God can do for us what we cannot do for ourselves. What God can do

with us defies imagination. With *us*. The good life simply cannot be lived alone—not without God, and not without other people. When we know ourselves to be eternally beloved and connected with all others; our lives take on immense purpose and significance.

Earlier this week I attended a reception honoring our friend and church member Chris Keller for his 9 years of service as Director of Volunteers at Habitat for Humanity. In the course of conversation with other guests I learned of a group of retired gentlemen—including at least one Fairmounter—who volunteer every week for the organization, building or rehabbing homes that will provide decent housing for some of God’s homeless children. When I complimented one seventy-nine year old man on his generous service, he dismissed my accolades, saying with a twinkle lighting up his deeply-lined face, “I don’t deserve praise. I pursue this work for the same reason some might play golf: *because it’s fun.*”

He’s on to something. When I visited Israel/Palestine last year, I saw with my own eyes something that before had simply been a picture on the “map of the Holy Lands” in the back of my Bible. There are two ancient bodies of water, both fed by the Jordan River. In one, fish play and plants take root. Trees line its banks. In the other, there is no splash of fish, no sound of birdcall, no vegetation of any kind. The difference is not in the Jordan, for it empties into both. In the Sea of Galilee, for every drop of water taken in, one goes out. It gives and receives. The other gives nothing. And it is called the Dead Sea.

Friends, take hold of life—the life that is really life. Choose the one step that will get us on the path—say yes to Christ’s call. There is no map to take us to the good life. Instead we have God to help us, and companions we couldn’t live without. We have God’s promise to bring us safely to our journey’s end, but even more: to imbue our lives this side of eternity with holy purpose, abundant grace, and joy without measure. AMEN.

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