

## CHRISTIAN UNDER CONSTRUCTION

January 28, 2007

Today we conclude our preaching series entitled, “Christian Under Construction”, with a focus on building a successful life. There are two passages of scripture I am eager to share and reflect upon with you. The first is taken from Ecclesiastes, Chapter 3, verses 9-14. Then we shall turn to Matthew, Chapter 13, verses 44-46.

First, from the wisdom of Solomon, we read from the book of Ecclesiastes:

“What gain have the workers from their toil? I have seen the business that God has given to everyone to be busy with. He has made everything suitable for its time; moreover he has put a sense of past and future into their minds, yet they cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end. I know that there is nothing better for them than to be happy and to enjoy themselves as long as they live; moreover, it is God’s gift that all should eat and drink and take pleasure in all their toil. I know that whatever God does endures forever; nothing can be added to it, nor anything taken from it; God has done this, so that all should stand in awe before him.”

And then, we turn to Matthew, Chapter 13, verses 44-46. Jesus said, “**The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and hid; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field. Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it.**”

Here end the lesson. Will you pray with me, please? Lord, with loving hands, like a potter, reshape and remold our hearts and lives. Draw our attention and focus from that which surely will not last to You, to Your love, to Your life, which is forever. In Christ, Amen.

Someone sent me a series of statements delineating what it means to live in this modern world, entitled, “Living in 2007”. Are you curious?

- 1) You accidentally enter your password into the microwave.
- 2) You haven’t played solitaire with real cards in years.
- 3) You have a list of fifteen phone numbers to reach your family of three.
- 4) You e-mail the person who works at the desk next to you.
- 5) Your reason for not staying in touch with friends and family is that they don’t have e-mail addresses.
- 6) You pull into your own driveway and use your cell phone to see if anyone is home to help you carry in the groceries.
- 7) Every commercial on television has a website at the bottom.
- 8) Leaving the house without your cell phone (which you didn’t have for the first 20-30 or 60 years of your life) is now cause for panic and you immediately turn around and return to get it.

- 9) You get up in the morning and go online before you retrieve your coffee.
- 10) When you smile, you now start tilting your head sideways so it looks like a smiley face.

What is terrible about all this is that it is painfully true. Recently, I was reading the newspaper, and there was an ad for Medtronic. Some of you are familiar with Medtronic; they make amazing high-tech equipment for medical technology. They were advertising an implantable cardiac defibrillator. Have you heard about this? They suggest that if you have had a heart attack or have heart failure, an ICD (implantable cardiac defibrillator) could make a big difference, because an ICD gives you more time to do the things you love with the people you love. You see, an ICD is the one of the most effective ways to protect you from sudden cardiac arrest, one of the nation's leading causes of death. But what caught my attention is that they show this little electronic device, smaller than the cell phone you have in your purse or on your belt, and then above it they show a funnel and list the things it preserves for you: 7 million snowflakes, 996 bedtime stories, 10 thousand kisses, 400 movies, 427 beach days, 4,354 blissful moments, 532 candlelight dinners, 7,651 smiles. All of a sudden it hit me like a two by four - which I think God uses metaphorically to get our attention. You see, we live in an age that has become remarkably efficient, but woefully inadequate, for we have become efficient at the expense of effectiveness. We have so emphasized success, that we have lost sight of eternal significance. We live in a high-tech world that has put us out of touch with what matters most, which really hit me this past week when I spent 7 glorious days without a cell phone on my belt. (Seriously, at times I actually thought I felt a vibration; it was phantom effect!) You see, I had 7 days without a cell phone - 7 days to rethink what really matters; what success, true success is all about.

So I want to do something different today: rather than focus on the scripture and three lessons we derive from it, instead I thought I would simply ask you some questions. Are you intrigued?

The first question is the most obvious: where are you going? What is tragic in our high-tech society is that today we think of that only in terms of a financial destination. We organize our lives as if the balance sheet is what matters most, and we do so at such peril to our souls. By so doing, our lives become so absorbed in the quarterly statements that come from our bank, mutual funds, and stock brokerage firms, that all we are thinking about is the final destination, as if success were something we arrived at. And that is an elusive myth, for success is never a destination; success is the journey of life that carries us through a life of meaning and significance, and it cannot be measured in numbers. Rather, it can't be measured in the numbers the bank or the brokerage firm provide, but rather in the numbers of kisses and bedtime stories, walks in the rain and quiet candlelight dinners, and through the sweet serenity of spending time with God in silence - just listening for a word of love that tells you that you are beloved by the Almighty; that you are of infinite worth, so precious that God sent His son to die that you might have life. Where are you going in life? What is the destination you are striving to reach? What is it that really matters and measures the significance of your life?

The second question: Is there a road map for your journey? There are people who will tell you that the Bible is the road map, and if you look carefully you will find everything you need embedded therein. I think they have it slightly wrong, to be blunt, because the Bible isn't so much a map that lays out and charts our course, and it certainly is not a GPS with a moving map and verbal instructions. I suggest instead that it is more akin to a compass that allows you to discover the true north of life; that allows you to follow a path of meaning and significance. The best analogy I can come up with, perhaps, is as a parent. Parents who truly love their children never want to so narrowly focus and direct them that it becomes coercive. We want to establish broad boundaries - parameters of significance and success. We want our children to discover the gifts and graces that God has entrusted to them, and then to follow their hearts and do what they love, because if you are doing what you love, you never work another day of your life. It is no different with God. God is a Heavenly Father who loves you and intends that you live your life investing everyday in discovering the embedded blessings and joys He has placed there for you.

We read in Ecclesiastes that there is delight, happiness, and joy in living within God's love. He makes it even more explicit in Jeremiah 29, one of my favorite passages. This is what He said through the prophet: "'For surely I know the plans I have for you', says the Lord, 'plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope. Then when you call upon me and come and pray to me, I will hear you. When you search for me, you will find me; if you seek me with all of your heart.'" God never coerces us; God tells us that living life a life of significance means living life in relationship with Him and with one another, loving the Lord our God with all our hearts, minds, souls and strength, and treating others as we ourselves would love to be treated. That is what makes life such an adventure. It is as if God slowly lifts the veil of the future and allows us to see just enough to be amazed and awestruck. When we live our lives that way, each day is a treasure- a pearl of amazing, infinite worth. The Bible isn't a road map; it is a compass that allows you to chart the course that glorifies God and brings amazing blessing to your life.

Which brings us to the third question: are you willing to pay the price? The problem is, in our world today everything looks so easy, doesn't it? Whatever someone else is doing - whether they sit down and play the organ or piano like Nancy does, or stand up to sing like the men did, or play golf like Tiger Woods - they make it look easy. I watch Tiger play, and there are those moments of delusion when I think to myself, "I can do that!" In actuality, I can't, because every time I get up from my arm chair (where I think I might be able to do what he does) and stand up to the tee, I disprove that notion dramatically. If you've ever watched Tiger, you know what I mean - he makes it look so easy! He bounces the ball on the end of his iron (I can't do that!); he moves and manipulates the ball on the green and in the air with amazing finesse. The man is a master, yet we look at him and say, "Wow, that is not worth millions of dollars." And yet, stop and think of the price he has paid, and this is always the case. Whenever we see anyone do something that looks easy, it means they have diligently practiced the art in order to achieve excellence, and it has required extraordinary effort because nothing comes easy in life - it all bears a cost. We never see the countless hours that Tiger Woods, for instance, has spent on the driving range or the chipping green or just putting. We never see all the hours of sacrifice

made. But now that he is at the very pinnacle of his success, every time he hits a poor shot off the tee people applaud, because for anyone who distinguishes him- or herself and pays the price, there is a measure of resentment in those of us who have not.

George Foreman, the great boxer, said, “A fight is never won in the ring when the crowd is cheering. A fight is always won on the training track”, in the hours before dawn when the fighter is running alone. And the question that echoes through it all is: are you willing to pay the price to determine where you want to go with your life - to map out the journey according to God’s true north? Are you willing to pay the price, and in the process cope with the inevitable detours?

Robert Frost was a crotchety old man, but he wrote wonderful poetry. “The Road Not Taken” is one of my favorites:

“Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,  
And sorry I could not travel both  
And be one traveler, long I stood  
And looked down one as far as I could  
To where it bent in the undergrowth.

Then took the other, as just as fair,  
And having perhaps the better claim,  
Because it was grassy and wanted wear;  
Though as for that the passing there  
Had worn them really about the same.

And both that morning equally lay  
In leaves no step had trodden black.  
Oh, I kept the first for another day!  
Yet knowing how way leads on to way  
I doubted if I should ever come back.

I shall be telling this with a sigh  
Somewhere ages and ages hence:  
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I -  
I took the one less traveled by,  
And that has made all the difference.”

Life is a series of choices, and I believe God laughs most uproariously when He hears the plans we make for our days, because in every day there are inevitable detours that cause us to choose, and there is a variety of choices. There is the choice of character and integrity vs. none, loving vs. not loving, living life vs. not doing so. And we choose. John Lennon, paraphrasing something someone else said, stated, “Life is what happens when you are busy making other plans.” I would add that life is what happens when you share the detours of life with a measure of grace. Oh, and that is always the distinguishing

factor, really, because what distinguishes a man or woman of faith and grace is that they still allow their light to shine when they have blown their fuse.

I have another question for you that is not on the list, intentionally. I invite you to write it in on your outline if you are following along, because you may not typically take the outline home, but if you write on it, the chances are far greater that you will and that you will remember. This is the crucial question that I have intentionally left out: Who will you take on the journey of life? Sadly, we live today in a “disposable society”, one in which people far too often dispose of relationships with a rather cavalier attitude. They may have invested 10-15-20-25-30 years in a relationship and then turn and walk away, thinking that a different relationship will somehow be better or healthier. My question, of course, is how will it be better or healthier if you remain the same and you are the constant in those relationships? Every relationship requires work, whether it is your relationship with God, your spouse, or your children - all those relationships require great effort and investment. And the older I become, the more aware I am of how precious those relationships are.

We were in Mexico for a week with dear, blessed friends, and I shared a great time with my beloved wife, MaryAnn. It was so much fun! Can I tell you a MaryAnn story? (Of course, I asked her first, because I rarely tell Maryanne stories as she vetoes them before you do!) We took part of a day to go shopping while there, as we wanted to bring back a souvenir or two, a few things for our children, and something for our friends, Marcia and Doc, who had come down from Wisconsin to stay with Stephen and Anneli. So we went to Playa del Carmen, which has this neat open market area, and had a great time. But you see, the difference in shopping there vs. shopping here is that you have to dicker on everything, because they begin with exorbitant prices, and they really are surprised if you are foolish enough to pay those. Truly, that is part of the charm of shopping there.

Anyway, we were shopping along and MaryAnn wanted to bring back a hand-painted plate for herself and one for Marcia. So we went into this beautiful shop, after having been looking for plates for quite some time, and she saw two with which she fell in love. The salesman, of course, could tell immediately! MaryAnn picked up the two, held them, and I said, “How much are these?” He looked at me with a straight face and said, “30 dollars each.” I nodded sagely, as if I knew what I was doing, and said, “I will give you 5”, and I looked serious! “Oh no, Senor! You are killing me here, you know?” So I said, “I will give you 5”, and walked away. Then he came down to 25, and I knew we were moving in the right direction, so I said, “6”. We went back and forth like this and were at the point where I had offered him 15 dollars and he was at 20, and at that exact moment my wife interfered and said, “20 is very fair, Jim - very fair.” Need I add that negotiations ended right there? I mean, he knew I was a goner, so that was it. You know, as I reached into my pocket, I had to laugh to myself to think how richly blessed I am to be married to a woman who helps the person I am dickering with - who has such a different perspective on life. And what’s more, she brings such light and love to my life. Moreover, it was worth so much more than I paid just for the hilarious experience! You know what I think about that? I think about the relationships that matter - who is it that you are taking on the journey?

One final question: how will you know when you have arrived? If your answer is “when you have enough money”, you are dead wrong, because the amazing thing about money is you never have enough. That is why I suggest to you that success is never a destination; success is living honorably and well.

I am reading a book by Doris Kearns Goodwin entitled Team of Rivals. Have you seen it? It is about Abraham Lincoln’s competitors for the Republican nomination for President in 1860. One of the fascinating characters described is William Seward. In 1846, when Seward was a young lawyer, there was a gentleman in his community (a freed black man by the name of William Freeman) who was incarcerated for a crime he did not commit. While incarcerated, he was flogged and beaten so severely that he suffered head trauma and severe psychological damage. He was released, and shortly after release, he massacred a white family. The word in the city was that no lawyer dare take the case for fear of bodily harm. Yet with extraordinary courage, William Seward did take the case and defended the man. There was no doubt as to his guilt, but there was doubt as to his sanity. William Seward was one of the first attorneys in this country to craft an argument of innocence by reason of insanity that was plausible and just. Of course, the judge, jury, and crowd were eager to hang the man, and they were shocked at the courage of this young attorney who stood and argued with such integrity and courage. In his summation Seward said, “In due time, gentlemen of the jury, when I shall have paid the debt of nature, my remains will rest here in your midst with those of my kindred and neighbors. It is very possible they may be un-honored, neglected, and spurned, but perhaps years hence, when the passion and excitement which now agitates this community shall have passed away, some wondering stranger, some lone exile, some Indian, some negro, may erect over them a humble stone and thereon write this epitaph: ‘He was faithful.’” More than a century afterwards, visitors to Seward’s grave at Fort Hills Cemetery in Auburn, New York would find those very words engraved on his tombstone: “He was faithful”. The final question then, what will they say about you? Amen?

Will you pray with me, please? Gracious God, thank You for the light that You shine on our lives and the love with which You mold and reshape our hearts. Lord God, thank You for the truth that allows us to live our lives with significance. In Christ, Amen.