

The Great Chasm

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I Timothy 6:6-19 and Luke 16:19-31

This past week I returned from an eight day conference called Credo. Credo is offered by the Presbyterian Board of Pensions, which is both our Presbyterian pension plan and our medical plan. For eight days – our group met in a lovely Episcopal retreat and conference center outside Richmond, Virginia – a group of about 25 ministers meets for assessment and reflection. The focus is on vocational health, and how spiritual health and physical and emotional health and financial health all contribute to vocational health, and, how imbalance or stress in any of those areas can serve as stumbling blocks not only for ministers to serve effectively, but to be fully healthy and whole.

It was a very good week, and I was grateful for the opportunity. We joked that what happens at Credo stays at Credo, but I can say that I embrace this holistic and integrated approach, that a search for intentionality and mindfulness in all of these areas matters a great deal.

I am not one that thinks being a minister is any harder than any other vocation, nor any more important, for that matter. We Presbyterians believe in something called the priesthood of all believers, so that every job, every gift, matters equally and significantly. But what I also believe is that ministry does have its unique privileges and challenges, just as teaching does, or writing, or doctoring, or installing, or consulting, or concertizing, or lawyering, or accounting, or parenting, or cleaning, or administering. Frankly, it's a good investment for our Board of Pensions to make in its ministers – both from the pensions side of things and the medical side.

Credo itself is a very intentionally chosen word for this enterprise. We get the word “creed” from *credo* – what we believe, a statement of faith. But at a deeper level “credo” means “give your heart to,” a full commitment, not just head, but heart and mind and soul.

As I said, we looked at all aspects of our lives – work and relational and financial and spiritual. They are interconnected. Because the Board of Pensions runs this thing, the attention paid to financial health was important. This is not spilling the beans. Topics for ministers include how do I get out of college and seminary debt, how do I pay for college for our children, how on earth can I think about retirement. This may come as a shock, but not all ministers are financial geniuses. Given salary levels for many ministers and given a decrease in full-time jobs in our universe, and debt, and college costs, financial stress can be very real. If there are 1000 good

reasons for me to have partnered with the life partner I did, reason 1001 would be that she is a C.P.A. Others of my colleagues don't have that benefit.

So financial stress is real. And we know it's not the only kind of stress. But it's a real one, not only for ministers. I would imagine that all of us – either now or at some point in our lives – have asked the questions about debt – car or house or education. We have asked the questions about how on earth will we pay for college for our kids, especially when it seems as if college costs rise with absolutely no relationship to anything. Or we have worried about our own retirement, or the financial stability of our parents as they face health challenges.

This is not just a minister thing. It is a human thing, faced by all of us. And because it is a human thing, it is a faith thing. We are ramping up to stewardship season, our annual giving effort. This is not a stewardship sermon per se, except that every sermon has something to do with what we do with what God has given us, how we give our hearts to our vocational and spiritual and relational and financial gifts, and how we often miss abundance all around us and rather choose to perceive scarcity. So it is not a stewardship sermon per se, but it is certainly a conversation – in our year of reconciliation – about how money functions in our lives, and in our faith – and how money serves to represent anything and everything that can get in the way of us living fully and freely.

This has been a hard week in a series of hard weeks. In Charlotte, in Tulsa, in Columbus, now in Seattle. I think it's all somehow related. Money represents so many things. It presents an opportunity to be generous. And it represents an opportunity to control, to exercise power. Those who have and those who do not, and what we do with what we have.

The Bible knows that. I Timothy reminds us that we brought nothing into the world and we take nothing out of it. I generally don't believe in bumper sticker theology, but this is good bumper sticker theology. Those who die with the most still die. You can't take it with you. The best things in life aren't things. The writer of I Timothy says important things about what money can do to us, most famously that “the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil,” a trap, temptation, harmful desires, ruin. “...(I)n their eagerness to be rich,” we hear, “some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pains.”

This is not money itself, but the unhealthy pursuit of it that is the faith problem. Lest we miss it, here it is again: “As for those who in the present age are rich, 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. They are to do good, to be rich in good works, generous, and ready to share, thus storing up for themselves the treasure of a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of the life that really is life.”

Take hold of the life that is really life. OK, perhaps it is a stewardship sermon, not specifically about pledging to the church to support our shared mission and ministry, but about seeking to be rich in good works, being generous, being ready to share, about not letting your passion be money, but those good and faithful things you can do with your money.

Then Jesus tells a rather difficult story to make this point. I think it's a reconciliation story, or rather, a story of a failure to reconcile one's life values with the values of faith. Two men, one very rich and one very poor. One living high on the hog and one living in abject poverty. We can imagine them then and we can certainly imagine them now. They both die. Crassly put, but clearly put, one goes to heaven and one does not. The rich man, in Hades, is tormented. He cries out for a little relief, a little mercy. And Abraham says no, you already had your comfort in your earthly life. So now a "great chasm" has been established, a seemingly insurmountable gap, between where you are, now, forever, and where you want to be.

The rich man seems to accept that. If you look at the story again you will see we get no details about his reaction. He accepts his fate and then musters up a little compassion, not for the poor man who is now redeemed from his poverty and suffering, but for the family he's left behind. At least can't one of your messengers go back and warn them, so they make different choices with their riches. Seems reasonable.

Yet, again, the answer is no. It seems harsh, and we can debate that. But Abraham says that this vision of generosity and abundance is not new information. Had they been paying attention to the lessons of their faith all along, had you been paying attention, you would have received this message, and sought to embody it, and changed – truly changed. You were presented with opportunity after opportunity to repent, to live differently. You did not. As have your brothers. They will not. So no, no warning. It seems harsh, but remember it is Jesus telling a parable as a cautionary tale to those who will listen.

I am sure I am overlaying my week away on some of this. But whether on spiritual retreat or not, we all have, every day, moments when we can assess our lives, seek mindfulness and intentionality and balance. This day, we can ask if and how our possessions are possessing us. And we can ask about the modern-day Lazaruses, those without, and how are we living to alleviate their suffering now. That links the very personal aspects of our finances with the broader conversations about poverty.

In a year of reconciliation, I believe that God's intention is to bridge the great chasm that exists, whether it be financial, spiritual, relational, physical and mental, any chasm that prevents you from living the life God intends you to live. Today it is money. Today it is abundance and generosity and true value and meeting human need. Tomorrow it may be something else. But every day it is something, some dynamic that can be either a stumbling block or an opportunity.

To take hold of the life that is really life. To give your heart. To bridge that gap. To make that chasm disappear. To be reconciled, with one another, with our best selves, and with God, who makes all things new. Amen.