

“Rock Solid Investments”

Matthew 25:31-46

Ephesians 1:15-23

Ezekial 34:11-16, 20-24

November 9, 2008

I remember a few years ago when the new millennium was approaching. There were so many fearful people, stories of imminent threat, the world could end, the computers would all crash, food supplies would be scarce, utilities would be shut off. It was nothing but fear and terror.

You didn't know whether to hide in the parsonage basement with as much food and water as you could gather, or hold an end of the world party at the church. It raised kind of a fundamental question about how we normally approach life. Do you hide and hoard or live generously and share. And how does the church approach its job in the world? Some churches seem to prefer to cluster in little groups of like-minded people and endeavor to remain free of stain from the world. Or a church can open up and generously share the good news with the people of the community.

People wanted to know about the Kingdom of God that Jesus was talking about. So he painted several pictures. This one deals with the day when we give account for our lives. Jesus says it will look like a shepherd separating sheep from goats. Now I always thought God loved all of his creation. But I'm not sure about goats. After reading this story, I know I don't want to be a goat. The sheep will be caring for each other.

We don't give out of threat.

A cowboy rode into town and stopped at the saloon for a drink. Unfortunately, the locals had a habit of always picking on newcomers. So when he finished, he found his horse had been stolen. He came back in the bar, flipped his gun in the air, caught it above his head without even looking and fired a shot into the ceiling. "Who stole my horse?" he yelled. No one answered.

"I'm gonna have another sasparilla and if my horse ain't back outside by the time I'm finished, I'm gonna do what I dun back in Texas and I don't want to have to do what I dun back in Texas."

Some of the locals shifted uneasily. So, he had another sasparilla, walked outside, and his horse was back! He climbed on his horse and started to ride out of town.

The bartender, who had sheepishly followed him outside, called out to him. "Say partner, I've just gotta ask. What happened back in Texas?" To which the cowboy replied, "I had to walk home."

Hey, it just isn't good enough to do good things out of threat. To give to God's kingdom out of threat. Because someone tells us we are terrible if we don't. Or something terrible will happen to us if we don't.

We deal with our giving straight up. We give because we love God and care about people.

We don't give out of fear.

There was a little boy who was afraid of the dark. One night his mother told him to go out to the back porch and bring her the broom. The little boy turned to his mother and said, "Mama, I don't want to go out there. It's dark." The mother smiled reassuringly at her son. "You don't have to be afraid of the dark," she explained. "Jesus is out there. He'll look after you and protect you."

The little boy looked at his mother real hard and asked, "Are you sure He's out there?" "Yes, I'm sure Jesus is everywhere, and he is always ready to help you when you need Him." She said.

The little boy thought about that for a minute and then went to the back door. He cracked it open a little. Peering out into the darkness, he called, "Jesus, if you're out there, would you please hand me the broom."

We cling to our possessions partly out of fear don't we? Will we be able to provide for ourselves? What if the times change? It is an issue of believing that God will guide us through the future.

We give out of awareness of our own blessedness.

If you have a bad day at work, think of the person who has no work.

If you despair because of a relationship gone bad, think of the person who has never known what it's like to love or be loved.

If you notice a new gray hair, think of the chemo patient who wishes she had hair to examine.

If you are tempted to complain about the food you were served, remember those who have no food to complain about.

If you are stuck in traffic, think of those for whom driving or owning a car is an unheard of privilege.

Don't complain because the weekend is over, but think of the woman working 7 days a week to feed her family.

If you find yourself wondering what the purpose of your life is, remember there are those who didn't live long enough to get the opportunity.

If you are victim of another person's bitterness, or anger, or smallness – it could be worse – you might be them.

Always remember how blessed you are.

We give because we know what has been given for us and to us.

John Felder grew up in West Virginia and he tells a story that is told to children who grow up in Appalachia. It seems there was a high school graduate from Wheeling who went off to a prestigious eastern college. The boy had no business going to that school, because of the cost of tuition, but his father was so proud of the boy that he made it happen. The father was so proud of his son's academic achievements that he worked extra overtime in a Wheeling lumber mill to pay the college expenses that financial aid didn't cover.

The father paid for the room and board and books. When his son decided to join the most elite fraternity on campus, the father paid for the new clothes that seemed to be required.

Instead of coming home for Christmas vacation, the boy went to stay with the family of a frat brother in New England. When it was time for spring break, he went to Florida with friends to soak up some sun. It was there, in Florida, where he received a frantic phone call telling him that his father was ill. The boy raced back to Wheeling. He entered a hospital waiting room where the family and father's friends presented him with a neatly folded stack of his dad's work clothes. There was a faded shirt, old overalls, and a worn out pair of work boots. The soles were paper thin. The boy studied the old boots and realized that his father had been standing on that hot, lumber mill floor for 10 and 12 hours shifts to make the money it was taking to send him to school. To pay for his Doc Martens, khaki slacks, and Tommy Hilfiger shirts. Rather than replace his own boots, his dad had stood on that hot shop floor day after day so that his son could have something better.

The boy had known that he was loved, but the reality of it suddenly swept over him. He retreated to a corner of the hospital, clutched the clothes to his chest, and wept over his father's gift.

They tell this story in Appalachia to describe a love that is extraordinary. As Christians, we tell another story. We tell the story of a God who loves us so much that He lets His Son come to earth. We tell the story of a God who loves us so much that He reaches out even to the people who don't want to be reached. He cares about the people no one else even thinks of as worth caring about. He marches to a Roman cross rather than turn His back on us. We tell the story of a God who loves us so much that He refuses to knuckle under to the power of death, and who comes back to us and is with us every step of the way.

Jesus tells us where to find the Kingdom of God. Among his people. All of them.

We might just think of a physical prison like the one I hear about from time to time. But there are people all around us locked up by fear, trapped by the past, bound by their inability to trust. Jesus calls us to set the prisoners free.

We think of hunger and thirst as afflicting people in Africa or India. But there are those whose souls are laid bare by humiliation and embarrassment, and live in an aching despair because it seems the whole world can see them exposed. Jesus calls us to wrap them in the dignity of his love and our concern.

We think the sick can easily drive to the doctor's office. My friend Lamar was planning to be a medical doctor, but God convinced him that even if he saved a million lives they would all die. But if he could save one soul for all eternity, it would count for more. Jesus calls us to touch spirits and souls too.

That money you give to God through the church is money that is an expression of what you believe. I believe in God. I believe He came for us in Jesus. I believe there ought to be a church on this lot at the edge of Cloverdale. I believe in the direction this church is heading.

I believe children should be taught about God and about Jesus and learn to love him. I believe men and women need to know Jesus who is our only hope. I believe in these things. And I put my money where my mouth is.

These are rock solid investments.