

The Life That Really Is Life

1 Timothy 6:6-19; Mark 2:13-15

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A few years ago, I heard a public radio interview with a relatively unknown singer/songwriter. At least she was unknown to me, and she remains so—I cannot remember her name. I do remember part of the interview.

She and the host were talking about the music business and her art, and the ways that the big business aspects of music can limit what an artist is able to do. The interviewer asked whether the singer was pressured by economic concerns to sell out her vision for her own work. She replied by saying, “It’s not like someone comes up to you and says, ‘We want you to sell out your vision of your work.’ What they say is, ‘We want you to talk to our wardrobe consultant,’ or ‘Our people will touch up your photo for the CD cover.’ The moves toward losing yourself and what you set out to do are very small and subtle. Sometimes you can get pretty far down the road before you know what’s happening.”

This is an insight that the writer of 1 Timothy also knows. The letter is set as correspondence from the older apostle Paul to the younger church leader Timothy. Its actual origin is probably a couple of decades later than Paul’s last years and Timothy’s first ones in church leadership, but the letter still makes sense as advice from experience to youth.

Part of that advice is a warning about ways of life that sell out the gospel. About the desire for wealth, the writer says, “Those who want to be rich fall into temptation and are trapped by many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is the root of all kinds of evil, and in their eagerness to be rich, some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pains” (1 Tim. 6:9). Instead of setting their hopes on the uncertainties of riches, the people should “take hold of the life that really is life” (6:19).

When Christian communities live with a value—maybe the value of compassion or generosity or hospitality to strangers—when groups of Christians live with a value that is higher than the accumulation of wealth, we are bearing witness to a whole different way of going through life. The Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann calls this kind of thing “acting out an alternative economy” right in the middle of the dominant economy.

And you know the dominant economy well. To use the words I want here, I have to quote Martin Luther’s Small Catechism. You may know that the first of the Ten Commandments is “I am the Lord your God; you shall have no other Gods.” Luther explains this commandment by saying, “We are to fear, love, and trust God above all things.”

So anything besides God that we fear, love, and trust above all things is another god, or an idol. This is the role money plays in the dominant economy. When we say, “Follow the money,” we mean that the fear, love, and trust of money can explain some behavior or turn of events. Find out who is getting rich from something, and you’ll have the motive for why it is happening and who is behind it all.

I say or I think “follow the money” a lot. But I notice a certain disconnect in my

thinking, and I wonder if you see it in yourself too. I believe that money is a power. For other people, money is dangerous. The wanting it, saving it up, being afraid it is not enough, and loving it is the path to all kinds of pain. For other people. But for me, money is a tool. I can handle it. The love of money won't seduce me. I can quit anytime. I bet you can quit anytime too.

I have come to believe that money is a power, like water is a power, or fire. We use water and fire every day; we are not usually afraid of them; we are pretty sure we manage them. We think we have them figured out, and we do, until we do not. If you want to know how small you are—and how imperiled from moment to moment in this life—look at a building or a forest on fire. Watch a flood turn the Mississippi into a river that is miles across in northern Iowa, just one state away from where it is a trickle you can step over! You and I have nothing to go up against that. Oh, sure, our civil engineers and firefighters have some things they can do at such a time, but the smartest among them know the force and danger of what they are up against.

The writer of 1 Timothy thinks money is like water or fire: a force, a danger, a power. It can eclipse all else that we fear, love, and trust. When that happens, we become enthralled with life that is not really life.

In response to this danger, the letter charges Timothy to tell the people not “to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but rather on God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment” (6:17). The antidote to the love of money is not the embrace of grim austerity, but trust in the One who provides for joy.

What is an abstract idea in the epistle takes on flesh and blood in the gospel reading. Jesus calls disciples: “Follow me,” he says to Simon and Andrew, James and John. Off they go on a whirlwind tour of Galilee announcing the kingdom of God come near, with Jesus healing many people. A few days into the Reign of God tour, Jesus calls Levi. Levi is a tax collector. His occupation is synonymous with the accumulation of wealth through dishonest business dealings. Tax collectors were responsible to get a certain amount of money to Rome. That was bad enough: Rome was the occupying power. But it gets worse. Anything more than Rome's share that a tax collector could shake down his neighbors for was his to keep. You can imagine the possibilities for corruption and resentment.

And Jesus calls Levi to be a disciple. “Follow me,” he says, and Levi follows him. The next thing we know, Levi is hosting him for dinner with “many tax collectors and sinners.” Jesus and his friends begin to embody an alternative economy and an alternative community. The scribes do not like the company Jesus is keeping. Jesus replies that the ones who have been running after life that is not really life need him most of all.

Earlier this weekend, our church council and committee chairs met for a two-day retreat. Our task was to explore ways that this particular alternative community might be in community with people we do not know yet, or people we do not know well enough yet. We documented big dreams:

- We want to know our neighbors better who are part of Living Waters, our sister congregation in Cherokee.
- We want to walk across the street and introduce ourselves to college students.
- We want to show up for people we already know who are struggling

with failing eyesight or the 24/7 work of care giving or other things that make it hard to come to church.

- We want to be a loving, inviting place for people with mental illness and their families.

We have about as much experience with these things as Levi had walking in the way of Jesus before Jesus called him. We do not know enough even to know the mistakes we will make or the courage that will be called forth from us when we take our first steps. But we came away from the retreat feeling like there is *life* ahead on this path for us and for others, and that along this way, God means to richly provide an expanded “us” with everything for our enjoyment.

With Levi and his friends in the entourage of Jesus, there is hope for us too. When we spend time with him, when we watch him in the places he frequents in the gospels, when as we gather right here at table with him and everyone he has ever shared a meal with through the ages, he will lead us into strange places and into company with people we might not otherwise have known or chosen. Along that way, he will always be more fearsome, loving, and trustworthy than anyone or anything else from which we seek security and joy. To follow him is “to have the treasure of a good foundation for the future” so that we may always and forever take hold of the life that really is life.