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1 Timothy 6:6-10, 17-19
February 26, 2016

It's **PARTY** Time!

Now I don't know how many of you paid attention to the text that Marylyn read a few minutes ago from the Old Testament book of Deuteronomy.

But, it is something, before this week, I had never realized before. Really ... NEVER!

The people of Israel are camped on the eastern edge of the Jordan River. Forty long, challenging years in the wilderness are finally coming to an end.

The book of Deuteronomy is set up as Moses' one last sermon before they cross the river into the Promised Land.

Here is part of what Moses has to say:

Set apart a tithe of all the produce of the land, your grain, your wine, your oil, the firstborn of your flocks. Take it to the temple. And then eat it in the presence of the Lord.

In other words, as you enter this land, and start harvesting crops, be sure to do some feasting with all that God has given you.

Moses' directions continue: *If the temple is far away, sell your portion of the tithe, turn it into money, travel to the distant temple, and then spend your money for whatever you wish: oxen, sheep, wine, strong drink, or whatever you desire.*

And then, in God's presence, have yourself the same big party you would have had back home.

Did you get that? Spend your money for whatever you wish!

Does this sound like the best stewardship sermon ever? Way to go, Moses!

Notice where the Israelites take their tithe, though. Not to the mall, but to their place of worship.

It seems they need to see themselves not just as givers, but as *receivers*.

They didn't raise the crops on their own—they had help.

By feasting in the presence of the Lord, they're making a connection between those crops and the God who makes it all possible.

Spend your money for whatever you wish.

Okay, we can understand the need for a party (we're having one today) —we've all received much from God's hands—but why the extravagance?

Shouldn't they be saving up for a rainy day?

Perhaps, but in this land flowing with milk and honey they will also need to learn to trust in this God of theirs.

Perhaps if they can, at least for now, "waste" some of their substance in a kind of God-sanctioned rambunctious party, maybe they will come to see that this party will not be their last party.

Perhaps they will come to see that God can be counted on to provide for them again and again.

Indeed, theirs is a God of abundance and not of scarcity.

Spend your money for whatever you wish.

There's at least one more element to this celebration.

Once they learn to trust in the God of abundance, they are called to share with those who have less: the Levites, the resident aliens, the widows, the orphans.

This party isn't simply about satisfying one's own desires after all. It's about opening the doors and inviting others to join them.

When you allow others to come and eat their fill, say Moses, God will bless you in more ways than you can possibly imagine.

That means our party today is for everyone ... regardless if you pledge or not. And it affirms this church's commitment to mission and helping those less fortunate than ourselves.

Fast forward about 1500 years. In our New Testament text, the apostle Paul is writing to his young apprentice, Timothy, about a number of things.

Timothy is a young pastor of the church in Ephesus, which Paul had helped plant about 8 years before.

And so, Paul wants to give Timothy, whom he had left in charge, some advice about living the Christian life and leading a church.

Among the matters about which Paul writes had to do with a

warning about wealth.

It seems there were some people in the church in Ephesus who discovered that they could cash in financially on the Gospel.

These people were so addicted to the love of money that Jesus and His truth got lost in the shuffle.

Paul tells Timothy (and us) that money has a way of displacing God in our lives ... if we're not careful.

It provides a false sense of security, it skews our perspective and values.

Often we can become so focused on finances that the really important things in life get overlooked, and we find ourselves in a place we never dreamed we'd ever go.

History is filled with the names of people who sold their soul for the almighty dollar. They never quite had enough. They always wanted more.

In survey after survey, when people are asked how much money would be enough in order to be happy, they would invariably answer, "A little more than I'm making now."

Henry Ford once asked one of his associates, D.W. Flint, "What is your chief ambition in life?"

Flint thought about it for a moment and then he replied, "To make a million dollars and take life easy. My big objective in this world is

dollars and more dollars.”

A few days later, Ford walked into Flint’s office, and he laid a package on his desk and said, “Open it. This is for you.”

The package contained a pair of rimmed eyeglasses from which the lenses had been removed and two round silver dollars had been substituted in their place.

“Put them on. Now, what do you see?” asked Mr. Ford.

Flint replied, “I don’t see anything. How can I? The dollars are in the way.”

Henry Ford smiled and said, “That’s right. Make dollars your objective and you see nothing but money, and the dollars will indeed get in your way.

“But if you forget about the money and focus on the things that really matter in life, the dollars will take care of themselves.”

The apostle Paul seems to agree with Henry Ford, and so he warns about the dangers of wealth.

And we need to hear that. For you see, money, for almost everybody in the world, is god.

Money means food on the table, a roof overhead, clothes on our backs, and wellbeing for our families. It is not a matter to be taken lightly!

Everybody is and always has been emotionally attached to their money.

They are nervous about getting it, and cagy about how much they have.

They let go of it only by necessity, and with hesitation, and never without getting something for it. To change this basic fact of life would take a miracle.

G.K. Chesterton, the great British journalist and Christian writer of the last century, once said:

“There are two ways to get enough. One is to continue to accumulate more and more. The other is to desire less and less.”

We all have a problem with wanting more, which results in a prevailing spirit of discontentment in our culture today.

Far too many people adhere to what one writer calls “The Cult of the Next Thing” – the next weekend, the next vacation, the next purchase, the next experience.

Bigger, better, newer, faster – these are the attributes of the *next thing*.

This cult’s central message says, “Crave and spend, for the Kingdom of Stuff is at hand!”

Advertisers make their living by persuading us we don’t have enough, that our lives are incomplete unless we purchase what they’re selling.

Unfortunately, when we buy into this lie, God often, instead of being our first thought, is relegated to an afterthought.

I know if DeLynn and I don't put God first in our finances, there are any number of others out there on our doorstep waiting to cut in line and take God's rightful place at the head of line.

I'm all too aware of who comes a-knockin' on my door the first of each month. Visa. Our Mortgage Company. Taxes. Kids. PG&E.

And I just know that if we didn't decide that as a matter of wise and faithful stewardship God comes first, they'd butt in line, take our first fruits (not to mention our second, third fourth and fifth fruits) and God would end up with the leftovers, if anything at all.

Cuz the truth is, if we wait till the end of the month ... there really isn't anything left over!

There is one church that I read about this week that took a unique approach to the problem of money.

In their stewardship campaign, they use a very simple mathematical formula.

On Stewardship Sunday, members of the church are required to bring their tax return from the previous year to the worship service with them.

At one point in the service everyone lines up, walks down the aisle to the front of the sanctuary and hands over their tax returns to the stewardship chair.

The stewardship chair looks at their bottom line income from the previous year, calculates 10% of that and hands back the tax forms with an invoice for the upcoming year. Everyone owes 10% – it is as simple as that.

What do you think? ... I thought so.

The theme of this year's stewardship drive is "Counting Ourselves Blessed".

This theme, this idea about approaching stewardship from a place of gratitude, completely contradicts the practice of a 10% invoice.

But if you really think about it, an invoice does not work in the church. I don't know about you all, but I do not get much joy in paying bills.

But I love giving to the church. I love knowing that – even though my money may be paying for electricity or insurance one month – I am helping this amazing congregation run and thrive.

Through our pledges, we are not simply paying a bill or chipping away at some debt – we are a part of something incredible.

It is not about 10% or 5% or 15%. It is about being part of an amazing vision and then trusting God to back us up.

Bottom line, whatever we give, it should be done gratefully and cheerfully.

In Moses words, "Take from among you an offering to the Lord, whoever is of a generous heart...

"And they came, every one whose heart stirred him, and everyone

whose spirit moved him, and brought the Lord's offering." (Ex 35:5, 21)

And in Paul's words, "Each one must do as he has made up his mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver" (2 Cor 9:7)

As you and I prepare to culminate our season of stewardship today by turning in our pledges and recommitting ourselves to God and this church, how will you respond to the grace of God in your life?

Will you hoard the blessings of God for yourself and your family, or will you loosen your grip on material things, be generous in your giving, and increase your trust in God?

Will you look at 2017 with fearful eyes and worry about your finances, or will you trust in Jesus who gave everything He had for you?

Will you rely just on your ability to scratch out a living for yourself, or will you look to your heavenly Father to provide for all your needs?

Giving is an act of grace. It is a way of giving thanks to God for all of the wonderful things that God has given to us. We can and will receive so much more than we ever could give.

God loves a cheerful giver.

So be a cheerful giver! Be proud of what you are doing and how you are listening to God and living out God's call.

Giving is not an obligation; it is an opportunity! Whether you pledge to give \$1 a week or \$1,000 a week, you are pledging to live out God's call

to be an active sign of grace in this world and that is truly, truly remarkable.

Pledging to this church is about something so much greater than our community, our building and our finances.

It is indeed about God's grace – grace unexpected – active and alive today. It is about celebrating a community that is vibrant and growing.

It is about putting our whole faith and trust in God and letting go of the things in our human lives.

As we celebrate the end of our Stewardship Campaign, we're throwing a party. We've brought along our tithes and offerings.

Oh, we've left the grain and the wine and the strong drink at home, probably just as well, but we've gathered in the presence of the Lord.

And we've been reminded that we need to trust God completely and we probably could stand to do a little more sharing with those who have less.

And, even though we don't do it for this reason, we have confidence that, as we bring our offerings to God, God will bless us in more ways than we can possibly imagine.

Amen!