“Money and the Meaning of Life”
Theme: The Power of Money
Scripture: Ecclesiastes 2:4-11

Things I’d like to remember from today’s sermon:
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Meditation Moments for Monday, October 20 - Read Acts 20:31-38 - In a final talk to church leaders in Ephesus, the Apostle Paul summed up his generous, upright quality of life. His words show in clear (and challenging) ways how he saw life’s meaning, how he defined “success.” In support of his view, he quoted Jesus (verse 35)—the only direct quote from Jesus that is not in the four gospels. That’s a tangible sign that early Christians prized and shared memories of Jesus well before they had the written gospels.

• Paul was going to Jerusalem to deliver a gift of funds he’d collected from Gentile Christians for Jewish Christians facing hardships. Think of a time when you gave something with an open heart (e.g. money, your time, a caring ear to someone hurting, etc.). Then recall a time when you bought an item you really wanted for yourself. Compare the two experiences. How lasting was the joy and well-being in each case?
• As he left this group of church leaders, Paul said, “I’m turning you over to God, our marvelous God whose gracious Word can make you into what he wants you to be and give you everything you could possibly need” (verse 32, The Message). In what ways has your perspective on your “needs” and “wants” changed since you’ve opened your life to Jesus? List for yourself some examples of how what you value has shifted over time.

Prayer: Lord Jesus, your servant Paul knew that life is not about “silver, gold, or clothing” nearly as much as it is about “helping the weak.” Infuse my life with that same wisdom and understanding. Amen.

Tuesday, October 21 - Read Matthew 6:19-24 - Jesus taught that there can only be one “most important” focus, one main goal, in any life. He said if the pursuit of wealth becomes the center of your life, you begin serving wealth, which inevitably conflicts with loyalty to God. He taught the clear principle that “Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also,” and then pointedly added, “You cannot serve God and wealth.”

• Pastor Rick Warren wrote, “If I put my money in my house, that is where my heart is. If I put my money in eating out … if I put my money in my clothes, if I put my money into a hobby, that’s where my heart is. So the question becomes, where do you want your heart to be?” What’s your answer—where do you want your heart to be?
• Scholar Craig Keener wrote that “Mammon” (the word translated “wealth” in verse 24) was “an Aramaic word for possessions or money, and Jesus seems to be personifying it as an idol.” Few of us would ever think of physically bowing down before our bank account or a prized possession. So what do you think making wealth an idol looks like today? What does it mean, tangibly, for you to choose to serve God rather than wealth?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, you are Lord of my life, and I want to “collect treasures” in heaven. As I make concrete, everyday choices of how to spend my time, energy and money, increase my capacity to live out your values. Amen.

Wednesday, October 22 - Read Matthew 25:14-30 - Three servants—two of them “good and faithful,” the third fired. In Jesus’ story, the difference was NOT how much they had. The one with two coins (literally “talents”—a lot of money, up to 20 years of a typical worker’s wages) was as faithful as the one with five. Jesus said our faithfulness to God shows in our willingness to use whatever energy, time, money or other assets we have to bless others and build God’s kingdom.
• What resources has God placed in your life (money, time, talents, possessions that could help others, etc.)? How are you using those resources to serve God’s Kingdom and bless others? Are there any resources you have “buried in a hole in the ground,” so to speak? If so, how can you begin to actively use them for God’s purposes?

• The apostle Paul wrote that “it is required that those who have been given a trust must prove faithful” (1 Corinthians 4:2). The Message says when we live in God’s way, “we find ourselves involved in loyal commitments” (Galatians 5:22). In what ways can the Spirit work through your commitments to God and people to grow the fruit of faithfulness in your life?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, when the day comes that you return to “settle accounts” with me, I want to have been a good and faithful servant. Please guide me in my day-by-day choices as I use the resources you’ve entrusted to my care. Amen.

Thursday, October 23 - Read 1 Timothy 6:5-11, 17-19 - The apostle Paul saw people lose faith and suffer “a lot of pain” when money was their life’s goal. He urged Timothy to “run away” from that damaging view of life’s purpose. Instead, he said, actively pursue the higher purposes of “righteousness, holy living, faithfulness, love, endurance, and gentleness.” Living that way, he said, is a key choice for taking hold of “what is truly life.”

• Someone said that although many people give lip service to the idea that money can’t buy happiness, most of us give “life service” to the hope that it just might after all. What motives are the main drivers of the way you live your life? What kind of outcome to your life are you “running away from” (verse 11)? What life goal are you pursuing with all your might?

• Verse 10 said money itself is not evil; the “love of money” is the problem. But voices designed to entice us to love money bombard us every day. As scholar N. T. Wright said, “Every advertisement, every other television program, many movies and most political manifestos are designed, by subtle and not-so-subtle ways, to make us say, ‘If only I had just a bit more money, then I would be content.’” What steps can you take today to resist the temptation to look to money for joy, success and safety?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, thank you for being my ultimate mentor, guide, and accountability partner. Teach me to value what you value, to take hold of what is truly life. Amen.

Friday, October 24 - Read Philippians 2:1-11 - Jesus pursued life goals that were at odds with much of his (and our) culture, and did so with strength, dignity and resolve. That did not mean that Jesus, as eyewitnesses described him to the four gospel writers, was self-destructive or weak-willed. Instead, it showed that the values that he taught and lived are values that will endure, values that give us a clearer sense of life’s true meaning.

• Think about ads you’ve seen or heard in the last week using phrases like “you deserve it,” “you’re worth it,” and so on. Paul, probably quoting an early Christian hymn, said Jesus “emptied himself” (verse 7). How did Jesus’ values differ from the ones Rome, Greece (and 21st century America) thought make for a strong, “successful” life? In the light of history, do you believe Jesus was well-meaning but naive—or was he right?

• “Adopt the attitude that was in Christ Jesus,” Paul wrote in verse 5. Philippians 4:2-3 showed that a conflict between two leaders, people who had worked with Paul and with one another in the past, was tearing this church apart. How can you adopt the attitude that was in Christ Jesus if you find your own position, prestige or comfort challenged? What kind of trust and character does it take to adopt that attitude?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, your earthly life reshaped our world like no one else in history. Yet you did it with none of the egotism and self-importance so many self-declared “messiahs” show. Keep shaping my attitudes to be more and more like yours. Amen.

Saturday, October 25 - Read Philippians 4:6-13 - Paul wrote (or probably dictated) today’s reading from a Roman prison (cf. Philippians 1:12-14). He clearly did not view his life as a failure, but seemed confident that he was in tune with life’s true meaning. He identified trusting prayer in place of worry, an intentional focus on what is good and worthy, and a contented spirit in all situations as keys to his world-changing life. He had learned to live out of a bone-deep confidence in God’s love and care.

• In a world that often seems fixated on bad news, how have you learned to focus on what is good, lovely and admirable? What disciplines help you to move toward Paul’s ideal of letting “petitions and praises shape your worries into prayers”
When have you found, in yourself or someone you know, the kind of valiant contentment that led Paul to meet even humiliation, pain and awful conditions with faith and trust? How can you more mindfully accept God’s presence in your life so that in all circumstances you can live contented with God’s peace?

**Prayer:** Lord Jesus, I want to turn my worries into prayers, and to focus on the good and beautiful in your world. I offer you all that I am, and all that I have. I open my heart to your gifts of peace and contentment. Amen.

**Family Activity:** Gather or create the following: play money, pictures of items a child might want to buy (toys, vacation, junk food) and pictures of ways to give (missionary, charity, church). Assign a pretend price to each of the items to buy. Pass out play money, giving each family member different amounts. Show your family members their choices of items to buy and ways to give. Invite your family to spend their play money however they would like by purchasing the items on pictures or giving to the places/people in need. After each person has spent their money, read Mark 12:41-44. Discuss the choices people made. Ask God to help you each become cheerful givers.

**THEME:** The Power of Money
“Money and the Meaning of Life”
Sermon preached by Jeff Huber
October 11-12, 2014 at First United Methodist Church - Durango

**Scripture Reading – Ecclesiastes 2:4-11**
4 I also tried to find meaning by building huge homes for myself and by planting beautiful vineyards. 5 I made gardens and parks, filling them with all kinds of fruit trees. 6 I built reservoirs to collect the water to irrigate my many flourishing groves. 7 I bought slaves, both men and women, and others were born into my household. I also owned large herds and flocks, more than any of the kings who had lived in Jerusalem before me. 8 I collected great sums of silver and gold, the treasure of many kings and provinces. I hired wonderful singers, both men and women, and had many beautiful concubines. I had everything a man could desire! 9 So I became greater than all who had lived in Jerusalem before me, and my wisdom never failed me. 10 Anything I wanted, I would take. I denied myself no pleasure. I even found great pleasure in hard work, a reward for all my labors. 11 But as I looked at everything I had worked so hard to accomplish, it was all so meaningless—like chasing the wind. There was nothing really worthwhile anywhere.

**VIDEO** The Power of Money Week 2 Sermon Starter

**SLIDE** “Money and the Meaning of Life”
A young man was in his 20s and making lots of money. He was on the fast track in his company and heading towards executive leadership. He had just bought his first BMW and was very excited about it. He pulled over on the side of the road as he parked in front of the building where he was going in for meeting. He just opened his door and a car came by that didn’t see him and ripped the door right off his new BMW. He jumped out of the car and began to scream and yell down the road of the vehicle because he was so angry.

There was a police officer nearby and he came over and tried to console the man but he just kept yelling, “That idiot over there ripped the door off of my car. This is a brand-new BMW. I can’t believe it. What kind of a person would do that and just drive off?”

The police officer said, “Sir, you need to calm down. You might be overreacting, not because you lost the door of your car, but in case you hadn’t noticed, he ripped off your arm as well.”

The man looked down at his empty sleeve and he began shouting and screaming again at the card that was spitting away, “Oh no, my Rolex! Bring back my Rolex!”

I want to invite you to take out of your bulletin your Meditation Moments and your Message Notes. Today is the second in a two-part series on money and today the topic is money and the meaning of life. These are two things that we care about a lot as human beings. Most of us are interested in some form or another in the meaning of life because if we don’t get the meaning of life down then life seems to have little purpose. Today we’re going to talk about money and the connection to the meaning of life. At the very top you find listed the Scripture text that will be using today and then below that are some blank lines for you to write things down that you’d like to remember. This is a topic that should interest all of us because just about every one of us is interested in money in some form or fashion. It’s something that matters to us and we have to have it in order to live. We struggle with it at various times in our lives and so today we are going to talk about our relationship with money. I’m going to invite you to take notes and write down the things that speak to your heart that you may want to remember and reflect upon in the days ahead.

Just below that and on the backside you will find daily Scripture readings and prayers which all tie back into today’s message. If you are watching at home
or online, you can download this resource right off of our website. I think you’ll find this to be a blessing as you build upon what we talk about today throughout the rest of the week.

Today’s message has a very simple premise. In our lives, if we are not clear about what the meaning of life is for us, then the default for most of us in America is to begin thinking that money is the meaning of life. The acquisition of money and the things that money can buy and bring to us is what life is really all about, if we simply go by the default we often find in American culture. We may not consciously think that but subconsciously that becomes the default if we are not clear about what our life purpose is all about. Today we are going to wrestle with the real meaning of life.

If we come by default to believe that the meaning of life is bound up in how much money you make, how much money you save, what you have set aside for retirement, all the stuff that you own then we will get to the end of our lives and find ourselves emotionally, relationally and spiritually bankrupt. We might be financially set but we will be existentially broke. Discovering the meaning of life becomes very important or we move very quickly to the default.

The primary example of this is King Solomon who was king over Israel from around the year 1000 to 960 BC. His father was King David, the greatest King Israel has ever known. Solomon was known for his wisdom so we talk about the wisdom of Solomon. Even if you are not a religious person you probably have heard that phrase before in popular culture. Solomon became king as a young man and he started off well. In the Scriptures we read that Solomon and went and prayed to God for wisdom when he was younger. Got expected this young man to pray for riches and power, but instead he prayed for wisdom and God said, “Because you haven’t prayed for riches and power like most kings do, but instead you pray for wisdom, I will also bless you with riches and power along with wisdom.”

Solomon became a wise man and people came to seek his wisdom from all over Mesopotamia and the Fertile Crescent. Along the way Solomon also gained great wealth. In the first seven years of his reign Solomon went about building a marvelous Temple in Jerusalem. It was a temple that would stand for 400 years as a sign that God was in the midst of his people. He designed a magnificent palace which was a symbolic reminder that God was in the midst of his people in
Jerusalem and God was there King. Solomon was right with God during this time and if you read the prayer that he prayed when he dedicated the Temple, he recognized that everything that he had belonged to God. It was a beautiful prayer and very powerful.

But something happened when he finished building the Temple. At the end of I Kings 6 we read these words. I want you to listen to this verse, which is very short, and see if you get a hint as to what went wrong in Solomon’s life. This is found at the end of chapter 6 when the Temple is been completed and at the beginning of chapter 7.

SLIDE 38b So it took seven years to build the Temple. 1 Solomon also built a palace for himself, and it took him thirteen years to complete the construction.

Did you catch that? The writer is pointing us to the fact that Solomon spent twice as much time building his own house as he did building the Temple which was God’s house. This was a sign that something had shifted in Solomon’s heart and life. The first seven years he was focused on God, but as his wealth increased he took his eyes off of the true meaning of his life, seeking to live for and glorify God—seeking to rein as a wise king who was cautious to take care of his people. Instead, his focus increasingly became the amassing of great wealth.

If you go on to read the next few chapters of 1 Kings you will read that Solomon came to acquire 14,000 chariots, 12,000 horses, 700 wives and 300 concubines. What are you going to do with 700 wives and 300 concubines anyway? During this time most kings would eat and drink from the silver chalice and silver plates and silverware but this was not adequate for King Solomon. He had gold plates and gold chalices and gold silverware made so he could eat and drink from gold. He had a beautiful throne built for himself which went up six steps and had lions on either side of the seat. The entire throne was made of ivory which was stunning and exemplified wealth. He decided that ivory was not good enough and so we had it covered in gold. Why would you build an ivory throne only to cover it gold? Priorities got all mixed up because the amount of his wealth was almost overwhelming. At the conclusion of his time as the King of Israel, we read this about Solomon in 1 Kings, chapter 11.

SLIDE 9 The Lord was very angry with Solomon, for his heart had turned away from the Lord, the God of Israel, who had appeared to him
twice. 10 He had warned Solomon specifically about worshiping other gods, but Solomon did not listen to the Lord’s command.

In the beginning of his time as King Solomon followed God with his whole heart but as he began to acquire more wealth, prestige and power he fell away from God. No one knows for sure who wrote the book of Ecclesiastes but tradition says that King Solomon wrote it at the end of his life. He spent his entire life amassing a great fortune and building fabulous houses all over the holy land. Yet he gets to the end of his life and you find that he looks back and sees that it was all meaningless, a word that shows up over and over again in Ecclesiastes. Always meaningless or vanity is described, like we find in this passage before us today from Ecclesiastes 2.

SLIDE 4 I also tried to find meaning by building huge homes for myself and by planting beautiful vineyards. 5 I made gardens and parks, filling them with all kinds of fruit trees. 6 I built reservoirs to collect the water to irrigate my many flourishing groves. 7 I bought slaves, both men and women, and others were born into my household. I also owned large herds and flocks, more than any of the kings who had lived in Jerusalem before me. 8 I collected great sums of silver and gold, the treasure of many kings and provinces. I hired wonderful singers, both men and women, and had many beautiful concubines. I had everything a man could desire! 9 So I became greater than all who had lived in Jerusalem before me, and my wisdom never failed me. 10 Anything I wanted, I would take. I denied myself no pleasure. I even found great pleasure in hard work, a reward for all my labors. 11 But as I looked at everything I had worked so hard to accomplish, it was all so meaningless—like chasing the wind. There was nothing really worthwhile anywhere.

If we end up having the meaning of our life be around wealth and our possessions then we find at the end of our lives ourselves in an existential crisis because we’ve wasted our life. We had a picture of the meaning of life which was incorrect and let us down a path of destruction.

Back in 1991, Jacob Needleman, a philosophy professor at San Francisco State University wrote a book from which the sermon title comes from today.

SLIDE “Money and the Meaning of Life” (Graphic)
When he was being interviewed about his book, he said these words.

*You can have all kinds of pleasure, but without meaning you wind up with despair. What I have discovered since writing the book is that human beings were built to give. To put it in the most extreme form, we are built to love and serve something greater than ourselves.*

It’s interesting because this is not a preacher who is standing up in a stewardship sermon about money in the Christian faith. This is a Jewish philosophy professor at a state run university saying, “This is what I’ve learned as I studied philosophy and human behavior. We were created and built to give. We have to have meaning in our lives. In the end, we are meant to serve something and love something greater than ourselves and our own pleasure.”

The Bible teaches this from cover to cover. Abraham was told, “You were blessed to be a blessing.” This theme permeates the Scriptures and when we come to Jesus he is teaching this constantly. There are many parables where Jesus talks about giving—the parable of the talents, the parable of the sower, the parable of the good Samaritan, the parable of the sheep and the goats. All of these parables share one thing in common and that is they presuppose that God has gifted you with time, talent and resources. God is given you the capacity to generate wealth and given you influence. God has given you these things in order that you might love God with everything that you are and love your neighbor as you love yourself. We are meant and wired to give to God and show compassion and mercy to others who are in need.

Two of those parables say that when the last judgment happens, this will be the criteria by which will be judged. It won’t be about how much Bible knowledge you have or if you have the right understanding about some controversial topic we get caught up in us Christians. Instead it will be about something else. What did you do with what you were blessed with? When you have used it well and wisely, for purposes bigger than yourself, is when God says, “Well done, good and faithful servant. Enter into your rest.”

When we think it’s all about us and bringing ourselves pleasure, in the end we find disappointment and pain and meaninglessness. This is a dominant theme in the Scriptures.
The meaning of life is really summarized in those two commandments that most of you have memorized. Love God with everything that is within you. Love your neighbor as you love yourself.

**SLIDE**  **Love God. Love others.**

We see ourselves as instruments of God and we seek to return to God and bless God. We thank God we follow God and we seek to be used by God. We minister to the needs around us and we care about people. You were created for this. I was created for this.

It’s interesting that in the book of Acts, when the early Christians gathered together at Pentecost and the Holy Spirit came upon them and the church was born, we are told that they served God with glad and generous hearts. When we serve God with gladness we find that will lead to generosity. When we are grateful we experience joy and in that we are led to generosity. That generosity towards God and others leads to more gladness and we were meant to live out that cycle of what it means to be the people of God, with glad and generous hearts.

But like Solomon, we struggle sometimes. As wealth increases it becomes easier and easier to focus on the wealth and more difficult to keep our eyes on the main focus of our lives which are loving God and loving our neighbor. As our wealth increases we begin to look for ways to hold onto it and protect it and increase it and multiply it. We begin to buy more things and then we need more wealth to be able to sustain the things that we have. That is what happened with Solomon and eventually he was convinced to worship all the other gods around him instead of the one true God.

There is an interesting study done several years ago by an independent, secular organization called the Independent Sector. They were studying generosity in America and they found several interesting trends. First, they found that religious people who were devoted to God, no matter their religious preference, were likely to give 2.5 times more than nonreligious people. They gave not only to their church but to other humanitarian causes which helped people in need. The person who is committed to their faith led them to greater generosity in their lives.
They also found that people who earned $30,000 a year gave away a higher percentage of their income than people who made over $100,000 per year. They found a direct correlation that as wealth increased, people gave away a decreasing percentage of their income. In real dollars they may have given more, but as a percentage of their income they gave way less. Those making $30,000 a year or less would give away 4.2% of their income. They also gave away a larger amount of their time and volunteered more, even though they often had less time to give away. Those who made over $100,000 per year gave 2.7% of their income.

It leads to a question. How is that possible? When I was serving my first church as a senior pastor I made just enough for us to survive, but we gave away 10% of our income. It was hard and we would give up doing some things others might do and see as necessities. You all are very generous to us now and we make enough money that giving away 10% can still be challenging but we still have a lot more left over then we did 25 years ago. It shouldn’t be a problem to give away 20% because we would still have a lot more than we did when we were younger. Somehow, what seems to happen is that we fill the gap with a whole lot of other things in our standard of living and expectations increased dramatically. The cost of maintaining our standard of living increases and before too long we find it harder and harder to give away.

This reminds me of a story I’ve told you before but seems appropriate to tell again today. A couple was struggling with giving 10% to their church and so the man came to the pastor and said, “Pastor, we used a tithe when I made $25,000 a year. We would give $2500 a year to God and God’s work and we were blessed by that and it was great, but today we make a lot more than that. This year we will make $250,000 and pastor, 10% of $250,000 is $25,000. That’s more than our house payment every year. We can’t afford to give $25,000 so we are really struggling with this whole idea of tithing now that we make more money.”

The pastor look at the man and said, “I certainly understand and can hear the struggle and how that might be difficult. How about if we pray together about this?”

The man said, “Of course pastor, that would be great if you would pray with me.”
The pastor took the man’s hands and they bow their heads and he began to pray, “Oh Lord, you know this struggle this man is facing with his wife. They are struggling mightily with tithing now that they make more money and it’s become so hard to give away this amount of money. I pray that would help them with the struggle. Lord, would you please help them by reducing their salary back down to the level at which they can afford to tithe and give?”

That wasn’t a prayer the man was expecting but you can see the dilemma. For many of you, if you are faithful tithers at the level of income you now find yourself, the largest check you will write each month will be your tithe. Our giving is meant to be a reflection of how we understand the meaning of life. We give first of those things which are more important in our lives because than the rest falls into place and we don’t get caught up in the wealth.

We are meant to have generous hearts and I’ve experienced that with many of you realize that when you give you get so much more and return. All of this is a part of life’s purpose, to learn how to give and be generous and grateful. Of course we have to take care of our own needs and the needs of our family. We are supposed to do that, but somewhere we move from recognizing that it’s about blessing others and blessing God.

We find when we are generous that generosity begets generosity and the blessings come back to us. We don’t give so that we get but somehow this is the rhythm of how God created the universe. When you are giving generously to help others the blessings come back. This is why St. Francis of Assisi said these words.

SLIDE “For it is in giving that we receive” (Graphic)

This is a fundamental biblical principle and we often rob ourselves by not learning how to give. This is counterintuitive because we think that if we hold onto it, then we will be blessed, but that’s not how it works. We give because we’ve been blessed and this becomes the rhythm of our lives. The blessings come when we give away and we are meant to be defined by this.

The more we give, the more we experience blessings. I saw this yesterday at the Habitat for Humanity house blessing. This congregation has been part of that over the years and as each family gives others are blessed. This is the natural rhythm of life. The more we give away the more we experience blessings. This is exactly what Jesus talked about in Luke 6:38.
“38 Give, and you will receive. Your gift will return to you in full—pressed down, shaken together to make room for more, running over, and poured into your lap. The amount you give will determine the amount you get back.”

What is the amount you give? I have met people in life, not many of them but if you, for whom the question is, “How little can I give and not be embarrassed? How small a gift can I make and still get the coffee mug? How little can I do so I can just get by and don’t have to put much effort in? How do I hold onto as much as I can and still be able to hedge my bets?”

The truth is that the amount you give will determine the amount you get back. It may not happen that way when it comes to finances, although many times it does, but in the general rhythm of life this is what you find. This is why the apostle Paul wrote these words in 2 Corinthians 9.

“6 Remember this—a farmer who plants only a few seeds will get a small crop. But the one who plants generously will get a generous crop. 7 You must each decide in your heart how much to give. And don’t give reluctantly or in response to pressure. “For God loves a person who gives cheerfully.”

I’ve told you this story before of Jeff Hansen who is an active member of his United Methodist Church in Kansas. At the age of 12 he was diagnosed with neurofibromatosis which is a genetic disorder. It included tumor which grew on his optic nerve and left him legally blind. He has since had some treatment and he can see a little bit, but still not much. When he was diagnosed, instead of focusing on what was wrong with him he began to focus on how he could help other people. He discovered with his parents that he could paint and even with his limited eyesight he was very good at it. He decided that if he made anything from selling his paintings that he would give it away. He gives away most of what he makes from his paintings and he was discovered by people like Elton John, Warren Buffett and eventually by People magazine and CNN and USA Today. His paintings are all around the world and he set a goal that by the time he was 20 years old he wanted to a given away $1 million to people in need.
Jeff turned 20 this last year which is why want to share with you his story again. One of his paintings sold for $20,000 at an auction this last year in Dallas and it put them over the $1 million mark. I love this picture of Jeff on his website because it shows somebody who was filled with joy, a glad and generous heart. This 20-year-old has now raised $1 million that he is given away to make a difference in the world.

The irony is that the reason Jeff was discovered was because he was giving away what he had. The reason Elton John and Jack Black suddenly took an interest in Jeff Hansen before he was really painting much was because he presented a check to Elton John’s foundation and Jack Black’s charity as a kid with a tumor on his eye and he couldn’t even see. The story that stood out was his generosity in the midst of that difficult place and as a result of that he has had all of these amazing experiences. People have come to find out about his art and fallen in love with it because he was first generous. That generosity has now come back to him and blessings have become overflowing in his life. When we give away it comes back to us, pressed down, shaken together and running over.

We make decisions in our lives every day about what we value and what is important. Every once in a while you hear something which is so absurd that you wonder if it is even true. Maybe you heard this story about a young couple in China who got pregnant but the woman told everyone that she had a tumor and having medical complications and eventually she would have surgery to remove it. She gave birth in their house and she pretended she hadn’t had a baby and then they sold the baby so they could use the money to buy iPhones. In China, the iPhone is prestigious object. It’s a status symbol, and no matter what your income level, if you can afford an iPhone then it says you are somebody. I heard that story and I just wondered how broken is this world, that somebody would have a baby and then sell it so they can have an iPhone?

That might seem like an absurd example, but how many times have we made decisions in our own lives that if we actually stood back and looked at it, we would wonder a bit. I once had a mentor who told me that if I look at my checkbook I can see what is really most important in my life each month. Somehow there is this connection between money and the meaning of life. We do with our money says something to us about what really matters for us. Paul writes some tough words about this in 1 Timothy 6.
9 But people who long to be rich fall into temptation and are trapped by many foolish and harmful desires that plunge them into ruin and destruction.

Remember that John Wesley said there is nothing wrong with making money. Wesley said to make all that you can so you could save all the you can and you could give all that you can. It really has to do with what is my priority. Am I making lots of money because that’s the meaning of my life? Or am I making lots of money so that if I made money fairly and justly I could do some really great stuff with it. Paul’s warning is to those of us who get caught up in thinking that we simply need to make money so we can have money just for the sake of having money or stuff. When we do that, we plunge ourselves into all kinds of ruin and destruction.

Paul goes on to tell Timothy to teach people in his congregation something very important and this is why I am preaching this sermon today to you.

17 Teach those who are rich in this world not to be proud and not to trust in their money, which is so unreliable. Their trust should be in God, who richly gives us all we need for our enjoyment. 18 Tell them to use their money to do good. They should be rich in good works and generous to those in need, always being ready to share with others. 19 By doing this they will be storing up their treasure as a good foundation for the future so that they may experience true life.

This truth presupposes that there is a life which is tempting for us to live which is it really life. In other words, there is a false life that we can pursue, and then there is a life that is really life and true and rich and meaningful. The way that you take a hold of a life which is true and rich and not counterfeit is by being rich in good deeds and being generous and willing to share.

The meaning of life is giving and blessing in serving other people and God, and money is a means to be able to do that. We began this sermon looking at the wisdom of Solomon and it made me think of a sermon series we did 6 years ago on the book of Proverbs. For that series I interviewed some of our wise sages in this congregation about money and I went back and watched those videos and thought they would be good for us to see again.
VIDEO

Wisdom Interviews 2

This last week we lost one of the pillars of this congregation. Pat Morris was one of the first people to welcome me to Durango in serving this church. She was the chair of the Trustees when I arrived and she also served as the chair of the thrift shop board. She was one of the founding members of the Thrift Shop down on Second Avenue and if you ever went down to the back part of the store you would typically see a scene like this, with Pat working amongst the toys and the boxes.

SLIDE

Pat Morris amongst the boxes (Graphic)

We have planned Pat’s funeral for November 1 which is All Saints day and that seems very appropriate for someone who is constantly giving to her family and to this church. You may not know this, but the Thrift Shop was started to help pay for the original building here on Aspen Drive when the church moved out here in 1970. The building was paid off within a few years and then the decision was made to give away 90% of the thrift shop proceeds to the community. 10% comes here to the church but it is only for building maintenance needs so that our building can be used by all kinds of members and the community.

As I was meeting with Pat’s family this past week it was fun to look back and remember all of the ways that Pat gave to this community and to this church and her family. What was really powerful was seeing her battle and journey the last year of her life with cancer, where she decided not to do any treatments because she wanted to have as good a quality of life for as long as possible. The past few months Pat has gone downhill pretty quickly and there has been a stream of people from the Thrift Shop and from here the church you have gone to care for her, including her children. It is been very clear to me as I sat with Pat the last few months of her life that it was very difficult for her to receive help from others, but help kept coming because it was something she did her whole life as she gave to others, living a very simple life but always being willing to give.

Her daughter Diane share with me a really wonderful story that I thought captured the idea behind this sermon today so well. Last week, as Pat became too weak to go down to the thrift store and serve like she did almost every day, she called a family member from her hospice bed in her house and told her that she was ready to be picked up at the Thrift Store. Her family member was very confused because she was pretty sure that Pat was at home. She called Pat’s
daughter who was at home with her and she went up to Pat’s room and Pat had put on her shoes and was ready to be picked up because she had dreamed that she was in the thrift store packaging up little boxes of toys in bags like this.

In her dreams and in her last days as the cancer got the best of her and she was just going on autopilot, Pat was serving and dreaming about serving because the meaning of her life is not about all the stuff she had accumulated or how much money she had made but about living her life for others. Loving God and loving others, this is who we are called to be as people of faith.

I have three invitations for you as we close today. The first is a very broad and philosophical imitation that you remind yourself regularly that, “My life does not consist of the stuff that I own. Money is not the meaning of my life. Instead, the meaning of my life is to love God and love others.” My first invitation is that you would buy that premise and this idea because it will change your life. Most of you have bought that premise already and you understand it and you try to live it, but if you forgotten I hope that today you remember.

The second idea is that you might be defined by generosity. When you get to the end of your life and your loved ones and kids or grandkids or friends talk about you, I hope they say about you that, “The one thing that defined his or her life was they were generous. They were generous towards God and generous towards others. They freely gave of what they had.” I hope that your life be defined by your generosity.

Finally, if this is your church family, I’d like to ask you to commit to tithing today. If you have never given to the church on a regular basis a percentage of your income then pick a number and start there. If you could start at 10% then that’s great, but even if you start at 5% that will be a huge blessing to many people in this community here in Durango and La Plata County. I hesitate to ask this because I know it seems like too much for some of you, but I want to ask you to consider tithing and giving the first 10th of what you have to God. Maybe you can’t do that this year but may be you can recognize that in your life you want to do that and you can work towards it by beginning by giving some firstfruits and growing from there.

People often ask me if it’s 10% of gross or 10% of net and what I would tell you is to just start somewhere. If you give 10% starting at any number then you will have taken a great step of faith. In our family we take my paycheck and we
take 10% and give that to the church each month. We also give to other things like Operation Christmas Child and missions. You figure out 10% of something and start there and if it’s not 10% yet then start somewhere and have it be an accurate reflection of your heart and what your life purpose is all about, as well as your own sense of devotion and gratitude to God. As you grow, you were able to increase that over time because your heart grows in your desire to be generous gross.

I know some of you are unemployed or struggling financially and so you might commit 10% of your time and commit to give when you are able and I think God understands that as we make that commitment to God. Let’s take that commitment to God right now in prayer

SLIDE Prayer

Oh Lord we give you thanks and praise for every gift which comes into our lives. We thank you for life and breath and the magnificent planet on which to live. These are all gifts from you.

We thank you for your saving grace in your mercy, for your love for us which is deeper and wider than we can imagine or believe.

You know the struggle that we face when it comes to our finances and the things that we have. We pray that you would help us to put you first in our lives, to be people with glad and generous hearts. Help us O God to love you and to love others with our resources and our time in our talents.

God, we pray that you would guide us as your flock here at First United Methodist Church in Durango to know that our commitments and gifts to you honor you and bless you and change the world. Those gifts change our hearts and bring us blessings that we can’t even see. May our commitments be a reflection of our faith and love for you. In Jesus name we pray. Amen.