

THE PRETENDER



Scripture:

Mark 12:38-44

³⁸“Watch out for the religious scholars. They love to walk around in academic gowns, preening in the radiance of public flattery, basking in prominent positions, sitting at the head table at every function. And all the time they are exploiting the weak and helpless. The longer their prayers, the worse they get. But they’ll pay for it in the end.”

⁴¹Sitting across from the offering box, He (Jesus) was observing how the crowd tossed money in for the collection. Many of the rich were making large contributions. One poor widow came up and put in two small coins – a measly two cents. Jesus called his disciples over and said, “The truth is that this poor widow gave more to the collection than all the others put together. All the others gave what they’ll never miss; she gave extravagantly what she couldn’t afford – she gave her all.”

Hebrews 12:1-3

¹Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us.

²Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.

³Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.



THE PRETENDER

I was listening to the radio several weeks ago and they were interviewing a woman from Tennessee who had just won that state’s lottery. The first question the interviewer asked the woman was the obvious one, “What are you going to do with the money you won?”

She responded that she hadn’t really given it all that much thought, but was going to start by doing some serious shopping at the local mall. “I am going to start a little financial stimulus package of my own, right here in Knoxville, Tennessee,” she said.

I could tell by the excitement in her voice that the people of Knoxville, Tennessee were about to witness the biggest cash infusion in a single day since they hosted the 1986 World Expo. She was ready to shop.

Well that Tennessee State Lottery winner got me thinking. What would I do if I won the lottery, and I had a million dollars?

I hope I would do a better job managing money than Evelyn Adams of New Jersey. Evelyn Adams, you see, did the almost impossible; she won the New Jersey lottery not once but twice, in both 1985 and 1986. She won 5.4 million dollars; 5.4 million dollars! But today the money is all spent, it is all gone, and Evelyn lives in a very modest trailer, just barely getting by.

Adams said, “I won the American dream, but I lost it too. It was a very hard fall. It’s called rock bottom. I made a lot of mistakes, and only wish I could start all over again with a fresh start.”

IF I WON \$1,000,000

If I won a million dollars I hope I wouldn’t make the same mistakes Evelyn Adams did. I am confident I would plan better and be more careful with my new found wealth. I think I would probably start by paying off my mortgage and the student loans we took out to get our two daughters through college. My work truck is overdue for new tires. Our living room furniture is looking a little worn after raising two kids. And the living room paint and carpet are well past their prime.

I would, of course, donate some to my favorite charities like Church of the Roses, Westminster Woods, Habitat for Humanity, Partners in Health, Amor Ministries, the American Cancer Society, Doctors Without Borders, the Presbyterian Church’s overseas missions. I am sure I would want to give some to the earthquake survivors in Haiti, Chili and China. That’s probably enough; maybe that’s too many. I may be a little too generous; you know one million dollars doesn’t go as far as it once did.

I definitely want to have plenty left over for traveling. I’m not sure where, but I am open for suggestions. My older daughter is working and living in Thailand. I’ll put that on the top of my travel requests. And my other daughter, Monika, is going to be studying abroad in Queretaro, Mexico next year. Sign me up for that trip.

What would you do if you won a million dollars?

HOW MUCH DO WE REALLY NEED?

We live in a society that constantly bombards us with advertising that tells us we are not living our lives to the fullest if we don't have the latest gadgets or upgrades. If you don't own a 54" flat screen HDTV with Dolby full-surround-sound that projects a 3D image, forget about it. You might as well not even bother to watch TV.

You thought that I-Phone was indispensable. Wait! Now you can also have your very own I-Pad. How could you possibly live a full and productive life without one?

I have to admit I have an I-Phone. Fortunately I did remember to switch it to vibrate before worship this morning. It would be awfully embarrassing if my I-Phone rang while I was preaching.

But, I do like to look good in the eyes of society; I even like to look good in the eyes of my fellow parishioners. The value system our society, and that even our church has established, demands that I accumulate a certain amount in order to be "in," to be accepted as part of the group.

**So the real question I constantly
have to ask myself is,
"How much do I really need?"
But even more important, have I ever
let myself go down deep,
into the depths of my soul
and hear God ask me the same question?**

I don't think I would really like the answer. So I often find myself avoiding the question altogether.

STUFF

Well I don't know about you but I have more stuff than I know what to do with. It was almost twenty years ago that I built a brand new house for Liz and me and our two young daughters. Our new house was so much bigger than the old house from which we were moving. Our old house near downtown Santa Rosa was about thirteen hundred square feet, and our new house was about two thousand square feet. All of the rooms seemed so big to us, and the closets were huge compared to what we had. We had so little furniture in our old house that in order to fill up these huge rooms, I made custom built-in window seats, book shelves and an entertainment center that took up lots of space to help fill up these giant rooms. All these new built-ins had loads of storage. When we first moved in, we didn't come close to filling up the rooms or the closets or the built-in cabinets. But now, twenty years later, the

closets and cabinets are overflowing. You can hardly open a cabinet or closet door without something almost falling on you.

I constantly ask myself, where did all of this stuff come from? Some things are buried so deep I haven't seen them in years. And if I really needed to find them I wouldn't know where to begin my search. I know I bought a new wallet several years ago. I was sure it was in my closet in the bedroom, but when I looked it wasn't there. Perhaps I placed it in one of my dresser drawers - no. Maybe it's in the night stand by the bed - no. I even looked in the tool drawer in the kitchen; not there either. The tool drawer in the kitchen! I'm really getting desperate now. Why would I even think it might be there? But you know, the more I looked, the more I realized my old wallet really was perfectly good after all.

MORE OF EVERYTHING

I remember it was some years ago, and I was shopping at Christmas. The stores were all decked out in the finest holiday décor. The lights, the trees, the decorations were all in place to maximize that holiday feel. I guess the retail stores have calculated that you will purchase more if you are in that festive, happy holiday mood. The store had carefully placed advertising circulars at every possible eye catching location. The ads highlighted that particular day's sale items. It went without saying that purchasing these sale items would deeply enrich your wonderful holiday season. They had printed bold alternating red and green letters across the top of the ad that read, "Say YES to more of everything."

THE PRETENDER

The singer and songwriter Jackson Browne was one of my favorite musicians in the 1970's and 80's. He wrote a song entitled "The Pretender" that I often find myself singing in those quiet moments when life seems out of sync and in disarray. Some of his lyrics go like this:

"I'm going to rent myself a house
In the shade of the freeway.
I'm going to pack my lunch in the morning
and go to work each day.
And when the evening rolls around
I'll go on home and lay my body down
And when the morning light comes streaming in
I'll get up and do it again. Amen

I want to know what became of the change
We waited for love to bring.
Were they only the fitful dreams
Of some greater awakening?
I've been aware of the time going by.
They say in the end it's the wink of an eye

And when the morning light comes streaming in
You'll get up and do it again. Amen

Caught between the longing for love
And the struggle for the legal tender,
Where the sirens sing and the church bells ring
And the junk man pounds his fender.
Where the veterans dream of the fight
Fast asleep at the traffic light
And the children solemnly wait
For the ice cream vender.
Out into the cool of the evening
Strolls the pretender.
He knows that all his hopes and dreams
Begin and end there. (slow)

I'm going to be a happy idiot
And struggle for the legal tender
Where the ads take aim and lay their claim
To the heart and the soul of the spender
And believe in whatever may lie
In those things that money can buy
Thought true love could have been a contender
Are you there?
Say a prayer for the Pretender
Who started out so young and strong
Only to surrender."

ARE WE PRETENDERS?

Unfortunately, I find myself identifying far too often with the lyrics of that song. I so much want NOT TO, but society seems to draw me back in. There are definitely times when I am pretending in my life, when I have given up my core values, when I put far too much importance on myself, not on God, and not on others. I know that my spending, my actions, my behavior and satisfaction do not always reflect what I believe.

**So what do I really believe if my actions
don't match what I say I believe?
I think there is more of a question
there than an answer.
But it is a question to which we all need
to give a great deal of thought.**

As a child, I was raised in the Presbyterian Church, so in some ways it's only logical that I'm here now attending a Presbyterian Church. But there was some point in my life, and I can't tell you exactly when, that I realized that the church was the only place that offered any contrast to the values that society was portraying as good. Society offers values and ideals that seem too often to break people apart and not build up community. I think my life would just be a rat race if I didn't have God and the church.

Society has a distorted image of God. For me, I find meaning and purpose in the church when I rediscover God's truth week after week. I am challenged by the contrast of what society says is right and good and what God says is right and good.

WHAT WOULD OUR CHURCH DO WITH \$1,000,000?

So I told you what I would do if I won a million dollars. I asked you what you would do if you won a million dollars. So the only question left to ask is what if our church was to win the lottery and have one million dollars dropped in our bank account tomorrow; what would we do with that money?

Well I can offer a few suggestions. I am sure you have your ideas as well. We could pay off our mortgage, our debt that's been hanging over our heads for the past fifteen or more years. We could do some overdue repairs on our church buildings and replace some nearly worn out equipment. We could put a lot of it away in safe, long term investments that will hopefully keep us financially strong twenty years from now. We could fund the major renovation work that our architectural committee has been exploring over the last couple of years. These are some really good ideas. I don't think we could do them all but we could at least do some of them.

But wait a minute; let's not get ahead of ourselves. We don't have a million dollars. There is no point in planning for things we couldn't possibly do.

Or do we have a million dollars? When I look at the church financial records, I do notice that we have nearly \$350,000 dollars socked away in our Endowments & Investments funds. That doesn't even include the almost \$100,000 in our Non-Budget account. It's not a million dollars but it's a lot of money. So maybe we could do some of the things that we all dream about doing.

Or maybe we could do some things we probably don't dream about but probably would be more pleasing to God. Maybe we could invest some of that money in some new, somewhat risky ventures. I know Presbyterians and risky investments don't belong in the same sentence, but let's just for a minute put that aside.

Perhaps we could do something like hiring a part time staff person to help us develop a second worship service. It could be at a different time, maybe even a different day, and be geared to attracting a whole new generation of church goers, people we don't currently appeal to. Let me be clear: I am not suggesting we change this worship service, but that we add a second service. But to do this would cost money. So why would we want to do this? One answer is that we would serve the worship needs of young families with

kids and youth who can relate to the faith story like *we* tell it, the message of the Gospel - the message of forgiveness, acceptance and wisdom. Young families with energetic kids often like a more inter-active, upbeat, louder service.

NO RIGHT OR WRONG WAY

Over the years in my home building business I have had clients who had me build ultra modern, flat roof, glass walled homes, as well as clients who wanted rustic, exposed wood beam craftsman style homes. One was not better than the other; they were very different styles of homes that suited the personalities and style of their respective owners. Worship is very much the same way. There is no right or wrong, better or poorer way to worship God.

Maybe we could also significantly step up our Mission focus. We could fully support, financially and physically, some worth while, very needy local mission project. The work we do with the Montgomery High School Breakfast program is exceptional. We could build on its success. We could perhaps work with the Presbyterian Disaster Service or Church World Service and send money and people from our church to work with these very effective groups in bringing much needed aid to people in need.

Our neighbors at the Saint Andrew's Presbyterian Church in Sonoma have adopted a small town in El Salvador. They send a small contingent from their congregation every two years to assist the town in a variety of tasks. In the past they helped construct a community building and a school. They donated twenty-two sewing machines and one hundred buckets and boxes of sewing supplies so that the local villagers could start their own marketable, sustainable business.

Those are some thought provoking ideas. I wonder what Jesus thinks of them?

THE WIDOW'S STORY

So that brings me back to the widow in our Bible passage in Mark. The widow's small, two coin gift was undoubtedly more than she could afford financially. Her gift has spoken louder than anything she could have said. She showed her commitment to her faith and to her community of believers. She lived her faith. And Jesus made a big point of this. Jesus is so moved by her action that you might conclude it is one of the major events in his ministry. This tiny act of generosity, when it is giving one's whole self, commands a holy place in creation. Who knows what act of love you and I have received as a result of that widow's gift, her generosity so many centuries ago?

TEACHERS OF THE LAW - THE RICH

You might have noticed the other people in the widow's story were more concerned about how they looked and where they sat than in what they gave. Their appearance to the community was far more important to them than their commitment to the community. Sure they gave money; they gave a lot more than the widow did. The amount they gave might have even been a very impressive sum. But what they gave was far less than what they could afford. It was far less than what the community deserved. It was far less than what God expected. God had given these people so much, and yet, in spite of their abundance, their main concern was not for the vitality and vibrancy of their faith community.

They were much more concerned about themselves. They were concerned not about saving for a rainy day, but saving for the never to happen cataclysmic event. They were planning not for the seven year drought, but the seven hundred year drought. Their meager offerings were an insult to Jesus. Their offerings reflected their lack of faith in their God, in their community of faith, and in themselves.

They had forgotten their ancestors, that great cloud of witnesses who had preceded them, who had worked so diligently and faithfully to serve God, to build the community of faith that they so richly enjoyed. They had lost their way. They were just simply Pretenders.

So where do we go from here? Perhaps we need to look to our second Scripture reading, the one from Hebrews, for some answers and inspiration. "Since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for all of us. Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith."

I also like the way the more contemporary translation of the Message translates that same verse: "Do you see what this means - all these pioneers who blazed the way, all these veterans cheering us on? It means we'd better get on with it. Strip down, start running - and never quit! No extra spiritual fat, no parasitic sins. Keep your eyes on Jesus, who both began and finished this race we're in. Study how he did it, because he never lost sight of where he was headed."

It's time for us to fix our eyes on Jesus, strip down, start running and never ever quit. Amen.



Elder Chris Rhodes
Presbyterian Church of the Roses
2500 Patio Court
Santa Rosa, CA 95405
April 25, 2010