

October 22nd, 2006

“Imagine”

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1 Corinthians 13:11-13

“When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways. For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known. And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.”

Of all of the scriptures contained in the Old and New Testament there is one chapter from which I preach more than any other – the 13th chapter of 1 Corinthians. The 4th verse reads, “Love is patient, love is kind, love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude.” The words contained in this chapter are favorites among brides and grooms and are often read during weddings as an illustration of the love that the happy couple shares. This is more than appropriate and these words are beautiful when read during a wedding; however the original context in which these words were written was not that of a wedding. In fact these words were not even written about romantic love.

These words were written by Paul to the early church in Corinth as instructions for living together in Christian Community. These words were written to the church to teach Christians about the nature of God, the nature of love, and the nature of what our lives should look like as Christians. As Paul closes this beautiful piece of instruction to the church he picks a top three if you will. Faith, hope, and love remain – and the greatest of these is love! And it is because these words provide such great guide for us as the church that I want to use them as our guide today as we imagine together what the future of Ridge UMC could look like and as we talk about the importance of being faithful stewards of our finances and of all that God has given us.

This morning as we begin I want to share with you an experience that I had a few weeks ago on a Sunday morning. On Sunday October 8th I was getting ready for church and had the TV on in the bed room. In the span of a very few minutes here is what I heard and saw...

There was a news story that was focusing on a new website to help us gear up for the Holiday season. The website tracks the availability and cost of the hottest new toys for Christmas and helps people figure out where they can buy things like the new Tickle Me Elmo Extreme for as little as possible. In the barely a minute long spot the story made several things clear – that early October is the time to start planning and saving to buy all of the expensive toys for this year’s Christmas giving and that the Tickle Me Elmo Extreme was something that needed to be included in the holiday gift giving.

Following that piece the station went to commercial where I heard Donald Trump pitch this weekend’s Learning Annex Real Estate & Wealth Expo where for only \$179 you too can go and learn about how to make yourself a millionaire just like Donald Trump. The key here – owning real estate around the world in an attempt to make millions of dollars is important, very important, and you and I should invest money in learning how to do these things because Donald Trump said so.

And when the news came back from commercial the first story was about a big star trek auction that had been held the day before. On October 7th more than 1,000 pieces of Star Trek memorabilia were auctioned at Christie’s in New York raising more than 7.1 million dollars. The 78 inch long model of the Enterprise-D used in the Star Trek: The Next Generation series sold for \$576,000. Keep this number in front of you, it will be significant later on - \$576,000.00.

We are bombarded by talk of money all the time. It is a huge part of who we are as a culture. Car dealerships, furniture stores, credit card companies, banks and more taunt their deals on discounts and financing and rebates. Entertainment news tells us about how many millions of dollars actors, actresses and musicians make for entertaining us. Sports television tells us about how many millions of dollars athletes make for playing games. Newspaper headlines tell us everyday about tax incentives, government grants, the cost of war, dollars being spent (or not being spent) on education and the environment. And when we get together with one another we talk about the last movie, concert, or sporting event that we gladly spent our money on. Talk of money surrounds us and it is as if we have become immune to it.

And then we come to church.

For some reason people don't like it when we talk about money at church. I have heard this said to my face and I have heard it said behind my back. And you know what? This doesn't make sense. The bible and Jesus talk about money – a lot. Take for example some of these tidbits shared in an October 19th, 2003 sermon preached by the Rev. Jan Brittain of Greensboro, NC.

The Bible talks about money – a lot! In the Bible, there are 2,350 verses dealing with money and possessions. Let me provide a little bit of context to that number. There are 500 verses in the Bible that deal with faith and less than 500 that deal with prayer. Imagine how upset you would be as a congregation if Steve and I never preached about faith or prayer. And the Bible talks about money 2,350 times. How much more disappointed and upset should you be in Steve and I if we never preached about money. The Bible talks about money – a lot!

Jesus talks about money – a lot! Take this small sampling from Brittain’s sermon – “The parable of the rich fool, the parable of the talents, the parable of the vineyard, the warning against covetousness, the advice to lay up treasures in heaven rather than on earth, those disturbing words about it being easier for a camel to go through they eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter heaven.” In fact, 1/6 of what Jesus preached and taught dealt with money.

The Bible talks about money and possessions more than four times as much as it does faith and prayer. One sixth of everything that Jesus talked about dealt with money. And people don’t like to talk about money in church. Why is this? My hunch is this. Good hearted people in mainline protestant churches like Ridge United Methodist don’t like to talk about money at church because they have seen this done in some horribly manipulative ways.

There is a movement sweeping through the country that has come to be dubbed as Prosperity Theology. Steve and I have both talked about this over the course of the last year and my mom alluded to it when she was with us last week. The gist of this theology is this – if we give money to God it will make God happy and God will bless us by returning money to us. This way of thinking is broadcast into our homes, written in books, and preached on Sunday mornings. It sets God up as a cosmic ATM and subtly works to convince us that God can be manipulated and appeased by our financial gifts. This preaching of the prosperity gospel makes me sick. And I imagine that whether you can articulate it or not this way of talking about money in churches is probably what makes so many people uncomfortable with the idea of talking about money in church period.

So, we have two options then as I see it. One is for us to ignore any conversation about money and to let televangelist's and people who are pushing this prosperity theology do all of the talking about the relationship between money and the church. Or, we can begin to have conversation about money even if it makes us feel a little bit uncomfortable. I am opting for the latter.

Does anyone remember how much that star trek model sold for? It sold for \$576,000.00. Ridge United Methodist Church's proposed budget for 2007 is \$513,376.00. Enough money to fund an entire year of ministries at Ridge UMC was spent on a piece of television memorabilia...

Let's take just a minute now and look with some detail at this 2007 budget. The biggest part of our 2007 budget \$437,161.00 is related to operations – paying for staff and paying for our building. This leaves \$89,215.00 for our remaining expenses. Of that \$52,402.00 will go to support the denominational ministries of the United Methodist Church through the payment of our apportionments, something that this church has always done with great pride. After paying to operate the building, to pay the staff salaries, and to support denominational ministries we are left with a program budget of \$23,813.00. These dollars go to support our outreach ministries, our caring ministries, our worship, our education programs, youth activities, and young adult ministries.

Now, our Finance Committee has committed to putting together a balanced budget for 2007. Taking a couple of hundred dollars out of each of these ministry areas will not put a significant dent in the proposed budget. I don't want to sound alarmist and doomsday, but here's the bottom line. The biggest part of our 2007 budget is our staff and our building. If we are not able to take in the dollars we need to support our 2007

budget these are the two most likely areas to cut and we can't get rid of any of our building. We need people to step up and make a pledge as we imagine together what the future of Ridge UMC could be.

Over the last couple of weeks we have been talking about God's grace and God's love and I've been challenging all of Ridge UMC's members and friends to imagine what our ministries could be if we would all become faithful stewards of the Gifts the God has given us. I have heard some great feedback over these few weeks, but I have also heard some concern that we are painting a misleading picture of our financial situation here at the church. As I have challenged you all to imagine what God can do with our prayers, our presence, our gifts, and our service I have had an optimistic take on things. I have maybe even taken for granted what some of you do and don't know. While I remain optimistic about all of the potential here at Ridge UMC the reality is that we are not currently in a financially sustainable position. The ministry areas and staff are doing a great job of monitoring their spending, but we are currently running a deficit as our income has not been enough to cover our budgeted expenses.

As we look to 2007 though I have great hope. Nancy Caddick ran some numbers for us a couple of weeks ago and found that we currently have 373 members; of those 279 give regularly. This means there are 94 members who do not give regularly. Most of these 94 are youth, young adults, in nursing homes, live out of the area or are no longer attending. This leaves only 11 members who are regular attendees who do not give. If you are one of those 11 I hope and pray that you will find a way to begin giving with intentionality. However, even if each of those 11 people do pledge, it is going to take those of us who currently give increasing our pledge to make our budget for 2007.

Here is where I have great hope. Remember, I said that there are 279 members who currently give. Regardless of what those persons are giving now, if each of them would increase their giving for 2007 by only \$5.00 each week it would be an amazing thing! For most of us finding five dollars extra in our budget each week is a pretty small sacrifice. It might mean renting a movie instead of going to one, eating out one less time each week, or passing on a CD that we'd like to buy – relatively small things. Now, listen to this. If 279 people were able to contribute an additional \$5 a week each of the 52 weeks of the year, we would see an increase in our giving of \$72,540.00 – this would be more than enough to meet our 2007 budget! Think about how easy this could really be – Imagine the possibilities!

Nearly 2,000 years ago Paul wrote moving and inspiring words to the early church in Corinth about God's nature as a God of love. As we make decisions about our personal spending and about our church budget for 2007 we have choices to make. We can continue to follow the lead of a world that pays entertainers and athletes millions of dollars and in which people are willing to pay more than a half a million dollars for a piece of memorabilia. Or we can heed the ancient wisdom of Paul's writing to the Corinthians. We can keep learning to embody God's love and Grace in real ways. We can take seriously the fact that God is love and that when Paul put together his instructions for the church money didn't even make the top three. Faith, hope, and love remain. The greatest of these is love!

I hope that before I even stood up to preach this morning that most of you had turned your pledge card in, either in the offering or earlier this week. If you haven't made a pledge though and if you haven't increased your pledge from 2006 I ask you to

prayerfully consider doing so as we seek do the ministry to which we have been called as a congregation here in Northwest Indiana and beyond. You can call Nancy in the church office, you can send the church office an email, you can ask for a new pledge card to fill out. A small increase, even of five dollars a week can help us meet our mission and ministry goals. The possibilities are endless, the resources have already been given to us by God, imagine what the future can hold!