

**Christ Presbyterian Church
Edina, Minnesota
November 12 & 13, 2011
Rich Phenow
Giving Hope
I Timothy 6:17-19**

There are so many things that make worship happen on a Sunday morning, it just overwhelms me. The children's choirs. Adult choirs singing together. We have folks like Nakita in the sound booth and Mike in the video booth. So many moving parts it is humbling. I am grateful because it is not about one or two. It is about many, and most of all it is about the power of God through the Holy Spirit.

After church service on Sunday morning, a young boy announced to his parents, "Mom and Dad," he said, "I want to be a minister. If Rich Phenow can do it, anybody can do it." You're not supposed to laugh at that. His parents said, "That's wonderful, son. Can you tell us how you made that decision?" The little guy said, "You know, Mom and Dad, I've got to be at church anyway on Sunday. It would be a lot of fun to just get up there and yell at people like the ministers do instead of having to sit and listen to them yell." Then one Sunday morning a little girl was sitting with her mom and she was getting restless as the sermon was going on and on and on (possibly I was preaching?) She got really, really restless and she whispered to her mom, "Mommy, if we give him the money now, will he let us go?" So here's the deal. We are going to take another collection this morning and I will let you go based on how much we receive." No, just kidding.

The reality is we have been working our way through a sermon series, and I want you to know that the last thing I want to do this morning is yell at you and go on and on, but I am going to talk today about giving hope. How do we give hope to people? And how can we give that hope through our time and our talent and our resources? I really want us to understand that it needs to be our desire to advance the Kingdom of God here on earth, that we have the gifts and the talents and the abilities to do that, and that God has given us free speech as a congregation and as a people. The series we have been preaching on so far is about a hope that endures. We have talked about a living hope and a sharing hope. Last week John talked about a legacy of hope, explaining that there is a cloud of witnesses cheering us on, those who have gone before us and won the race.

We experienced hope this last month when some of us took the three-day meal challenge and raised \$14,000 for famine relief in the horn of Africa. We ate a small amount of beans and rice for three days and then tried to give generously out of that experience for hunger in Africa. A couple of weeks ago the Great Room came to life in the Trade As One Market when we were able to purchase handmade goods by Third World artisans. We experienced hope and shared hope as we made 317 purchases worth \$31,500.

We have focused on how Jesus offers us a hope that endures in this life and into the next, shaping who we are today and showing us how we can share His love with others, not just for

the here and now but also for the age to come. Today I want to look at the idea that we have a hope that gives life, that Paul says is truly, truly life. Paul says we receive that life through a generous willingness to share from our wealth. I want us to look at the text of Paul's words to Timothy, his young disciple, in 1st Timothy 6:17-19. It is found on page 1,771 of your pew Bibles. I want you to open that up because I am going to refer to some texts all throughout this chapter. This is Paul's wisdom and instruction about those of great wealth in his church. Hear the Word of God.

¹⁷ Command those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant nor to put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain, but to put their hope in God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. ¹⁸ Command them to do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share. ¹⁹ In this way they will lay up treasure for themselves as a firm foundation for the coming age, so that they may take hold of the life that is truly life.

Keep your finger there on that page and grab a pencil. We are going to do some underlining in the Bible. We want you to get a grasp of what Paul was talking about when we take hold of a life that is truly life. We are the richest nation in the world. Americans today have more material possessions, more resources and more options to choose than any other people in all of history. The question is, are we happier or more content? In a 1950s survey, about 53 percent of the population said that they felt content, that they felt happy. That same survey went out in the 1990s and the number dropped to about 30 percent. Those with greater wealth and higher incomes reported no greater level of happiness than anyone else. In 40 years the number went from 53 percent to 30 percent. The survey numbers today show that 25 percent of us feel content and happy.

Look at verse 6. Paul indicates that godliness, using godly character, along with contentment is our greatest gain. Then in verse 11 he tells us what to pursue. He says, "Go after faith. Go after righteousness, a great relationship with others and with God. Go after love. Go after endurance, which is patience. Go after gentleness. If you want to be content, pursue those godly characteristics." A PBS program called *Affluenza* addressed what it called the modern day plague of materialism. The program claimed that the average American shops six hours a week while spending less than 40 minutes playing with their children. By the age of 20 we have viewed over a million commercials on TV. The program stated that there are more Americans declaring bankruptcy than are graduating from college. In 90 percent of divorces, issues relating to money were the primary cause. It said we live in a time of possession obsession, a time of large flat-screen TVs, iPods, iPads, iPhones and bulging eyes. The program quoted famous people in a document they released. They quoted John D. Rockefeller who said, "I have made many millions but it has brought me no happiness." Andrew Carnegie said, "Millionaires seldom smile," and Henry Ford said, "I was much happier when I was doing a mechanic's job."

One morning this week as I was driving to church early I heard on the radio that the Kardashian-Humphries relationship had ended. They were married for 72 days, and together in that 72 days they made \$19 million - just a little more than I do. They made that \$19 million through their wedding, TV show and photo ops. That meant that each of them earned about \$200,000 a day, but we all know that material wealth does not equate with relational happiness. They have now both acquired well-known lawyers to battle out the \$19 million.

We are stuff collectors, aren't we? I am one. We all have stuff. We see it. We want it. We buy it. We insure it. We display it, and then we compare it with other people's stuff. We look at other people's stuff and become envious or we judge them for having too much stuff. We have a basement full of stuff, and we have a storage room above our garage full of stuff. We had a one-car garage that never had a car in it because we had so much stuff. So what did we do? We built a two-car garage. It still hasn't had a car in it. It is full of all our stuff.

Have you ever tried to purge yourself of stuff? Have a garage sale or get a dumpster and purge yourself of stuff? It is an amazing exercise. We did that, but you know what we did? We created more room for more stuff. There are more than 30,000 self-storage facilities in this country that offer us over a billion square feet to store stuff. We spend \$12 billion dollars a year just to pay somebody to watch our stuff and store it for us. We are stuff collectors. What was Jesus' response to stuff? What was His response to wealth? In Matthew 6:19-21, Jesus said this.

¹⁹ "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. ²⁰ But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. ²¹ For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

The largest single subject that Jesus taught about had to do with money because there is a connection to our spiritual life when it comes to how we handle our money. The more we have, the more we want, and what we have owns us by turning into stuff. Look at the text again in verse 17. Paul's response to that is, "Don't be arrogant. Don't put your hope in wealth, but put your hope in God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. The things we have from this world are temporal, but our hope in God is eternal."

I remember reading a story about the way in primitive times people in Africa would catch little monkeys. Knowing that coconuts were one of monkeys' favorite fruits, they would take a coconut and punch a hole in it. The hole would be just large enough for a little monkey paw to reach inside. They would put a pebble inside the coconut and place it at the bottom of a tree. A monkey would come along and pick it up about to break it open but would hear a little rumble inside. It would be fascinated by the sound and would stick its paw inside to grab the pebble but then would not be able to get its paw out and, consequently, was very easily caught.

When I was in high school, I remember well our economics teacher. I think I only had the one class in economics. I didn't do real well in it. The professor brought a student up to the front of the class. He had a vase, a jar, full of money, \$20, \$10, \$5 and \$100 bills. He said, "Let me teach you a lesson in economics. Stick your hand in there. Grab as many of those big bills as you can and take them out." So the student stuck his hand in there but he grabbed such a wad of money, he couldn't get his fist out. I think there is metaphor here for us, a metaphor about our wealth and about the things we have. They either trap us or we can't let go of them. We hold on to them tight. I think the arrogant part for us that Paul is talking about is that we become so gripped and so trapped by our money and our stuff that we hold on to it tightly because we think somehow it is going to help us feel content and happy. We push God out of the equation and put our hope in the wrong place, but less than 25 percent of us feel content and happy. The psalmist reminds us in Psalm 24:1,

¹ The earth is the LORD's, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it....

The world and all of its people belong to Him. All of our wealth. All of our stuff. Even our very selves don't belong to us. Everything belongs to God. We have only been given things to be good stewards, to honor God with our gifts and our treasures. In order to take hold of the life that is truly life, we have to let go of our stuff out of obedience to God. We have to put our hope in our everlasting God so that we lay up treasures for ourselves as the firm foundation for the coming age. Paul says we are to work on the treasures of our characters because that is what is going to matter in the coming age not the things of this world. Where our treasure is is really about our heart condition. They are connected. Our spiritual life has a lot to do with our heart, and our heart has a lot to do with the way that we hold on to things and how we look for them to provide contentment. Mother Teresa said, "Live simply so others can simply live."

A week ago Friday I sat at the graveside of a woman 58 years old who died of breast cancer. I sat there for over an hour with her two boys and her mom and her siblings on this beautiful bluff in Sauk Centre on a sunny fall day. We put her cremains in the earth and told stories about her character. It was fascinating. No one talked about her accomplishments. No one talked about her money. You know what they talked about? Her character. It was amazing. About seven years ago she went through treatment for her demon, alcohol. For seven years she lived sober, and she developed her character, her everlasting treasures. Those were the things that her family talked about. They didn't talk about her overcrowded apartment full of stuff. They didn't talk about her huge trophies I saw there. They talked about her character. They talked about her heart. You see, a sense of freedom comes when we let go of the things that are temporal.

Paul says the first step in taking hold of the true life is admitting that we are arrogant, that we have to put our hope in the right place. The second step, Paul says, is that in order for us to take hold of the true life, to really experience it, we have to be willing to be rich in good deeds, to be generous, to be willing to share. The reason is because a sense of freedom comes when we give of ourselves, and what happens is when we put our confidence and our hope in God, when we give away the things that we hold so tightly to, suddenly we begin to trust God that He will provide for us. He will take care of us. Paul is telling Timothy to teach that those with affluence, and that would be us, have a great responsibility. Paul writes in verse 10,

¹⁰ For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs.

It is the love of money that is evil. It is the craving for it that causes us to wander from our faith, from the true life. Not money. Money is not bad. It is the love for money. Paul says,

¹⁸ Command them to do good, to be rich in good deeds and to be generous and willing to share.

Be outrageous in your generosity. Share. For no matter how much we have, God owns it all, and it has just been given to us so we can be good stewards of it. A couple of weeks ago before Halloween on a Wednesday evening, our high school seniors met to do a little project for the seniors of our church. They made little Halloween bags. They took little boxes and filled them full of candy. They got an Upper Room devotional and they put it in the bag, too. Then they wrote a note, "From a senior to a senior." Jody and I distributed a lot of those bags. I brought about 30 of them to my Bible study at 7500 York. It was an amazing experience. These high school kids did this little exercise not realizing what an impact it would make. The seniors of our church have been sending thank you notes like crazy, and Thursday at my Bible study they all

had signed a big note of gratitude to the seniors. They didn't thank them for the candy, and they didn't thank them for the stationery. They thanked them for the note that they wrote, "From a senior to a senior." I went to the house where the seniors in high school meet, and I said, "You made a difference. Your simple little act of sharing impacted these seniors' lives in a profound way."

Another example of generous sharing in our CPC family can be seen in a couple who opened their home to a homeless family, a mother and her four children. The couple's daughters are away at college, and they just opened their home because they had faith. They don't have the means and they don't have the resources, but these are people who are outrageous in their generosity. Paul said, "We've got to give it away. We've got to share it."

There is another couple here in our church that understands generosity in a pretty interesting way. They are a young couple, Greg and Tonja Engen. I am going to have them come up and have a little conversation with them to end the sermon. Greg and Tonja, take a seat over here. I'm going to use the tall stool because you both are probably taller than I am. These are folks who have been part of our church for about 12 plus years now. These are people, I think, who have some good insights on this whole idea of sharing. What is interesting is I had to beg them and almost pay them to come up here and be willing to do this because they are so humble.

Rich: I'm going to ask you a few questions. I want you to tell all of us here, why do you think it is important to use your time and your talent at this church? Why is it important for you to be involved?

Greg: I'll take that. I think, and it's a lot of what you've already said, that we believe that God really does give us gifts, and it really is our responsibility to use those gifts for His good. We have been fortunate enough to be able to share in a lot of different ways. Tonja definitely has the gift of hospitality, making meals, inviting people into our home in times of need and transition, things like that. And also through kids ministry and now through the Elevate program. I've been fortunate enough to use some of my professional skills in business consulting and planning here at the church, specifically with The Table and what's going on there. I think, big or small, by giving it really is freeing, and you get back in so many unintended ways, and God returns those gifts back to you.

Rich: So Tonja's hospitality, and Greg's professional abilities consulting with The Table and their being ushers here at the service. It is an important thing for them to share and to give back. We do something here at the church every year. At this time we send out these commitment cards and ask people to bring them back or send them back. Greg and Tonja, you've been doing that for 12 years now. I want to know why is stewardship, why is generous giving from your resources, so important to you?

Tonja: When we start out in something, Greg and I always want to be really prayerful about it and about who we are. We want to be intentional about our giving and this pledge card and God helps us give what we can. By doing this, I think we are not only just accountable to receive but ultimately to God. Just like you were saying in your sermon, Rich, none of this is ours anyway, and, when you have that truth, there really is bringing together. Greg and I talk about this a lot. A pastor a few years ago had this great example: the monopoly analogy. We have all played Monopoly. We have all had our houses and our hotels and properties, like Park Place and Boardwalk and just piled the money in front of us. But at the end of the day when the game is

over, we shut the board and it all goes back in the box. For us that is just a little reminder of whose resources these are. They are God's.

Rich: So for you it is kind of about this eternal treasure. It is not about more hotels and more houses and more money. It really is about an opportunity to give graciously from what you have been given because it is not yours. I want to know what has happened to you and to your hearts and your lives as a result of your generous giving? How has making this kind of commitment changed you, and how has it made you feel? Has it make you feel destitute and have a greater fear because of the economy? How do you guys feel about it? How is it shaping you?

Greg: I think overall, the whole process really has brought us closer together in our marriage and in our family because when you have to literally sit down and think about how you see your resources, your financial resources, how you want to spend your time, it really takes *you* out of the way. It allows you to come together and really think about the things that are truly important in your life and how you really want to make a difference. Ultimately, it really is great. As you said, it is a hopeful message for ourselves, and if we are out there serving, a hopeful message, for those around us as well.

Rich: So it has actually enriched your relationship. This is a bonus question. They didn't know I was going to ask this. How are you shaping the kids? How are you helping them with this understanding of generous giving?

Greg: I don't know if they ever listen to anything we say but....

Rich: You get extra credit for this....

Tonja: I think by wanting to model that and just teach them the little things you do, making a meal for someone and bringing it there. They are just glad they are not needing it but, really, they know they are blessing that neighbor or that family. It's just the little things.

Greg: Yes, I think that is a good example. Last year Tonja and the kids, it was kind of their deal, every week Tonja would ask them, "Who shall we make a meal for this week?" They would decide who it would go to, and Tonja would make a meal, and they would bring it over. It really brought them into that spirit of hospitality and giving. They wouldn't come this morning because they are really embarrassed that we had to get up here, so....

Rich: I know that feeling. My kids are the same way. You know what is neat about that? I'm amazed at how much our kids catch. We think it is all about teaching them and that is really important, but is it really what we've taught them or what they've caught by the way we live and the way we give and by the way we shape others? Can we thank these guys for doing this?

(clapping)

Rich: Generosity, giving, is really is a gift from God. I want to ask this question of all of us. I want to ask, what is the condition of your heart and where is your treasure? You see, Paul seems to indicate that it is about humbly letting go, that it is about loosening our grip on the pebble in the jar, the things that trap us. In order to really experience this freedom that God wants us to experience and truly engage in the life that is truly life, we have to take small steps and make commitments. Whether it is a commitment to teach here in Sunday school, whether it is a

commitment to make cookies for funerals, or a commitment to serve as an usher, whether it is a college student who makes a commitment to care for their sick roommate and bring them some Campbell's chicken noodle soup or some Little Debbie's or something. It is about letting go, and it is about making small commitments. It is about putting our hope in the right places. It is about our hearts. Let's pray.

Gracious God, I thank You for Greg and Tonja. I thank You for all the folks here today. We pray that we would understand what it means to hold our hope in You and then trust You, God, and live life truly by giving hope to others and opening our hands and our hearts to You. Help us to have the courage to take some steps. Help us to have the courage to share and be outrageously generous. Give us Your strength and power to do that, to be obedient, to do good deeds and to share. We need Your help to do that because sometimes we just tighten the grip, and we become more and more insecure. Give us Your hope so we can give Your hope to others. In Your Holy Name I pray. Amen.

The nature of oral presentations makes them less precise than written materials; any lack of attribution is unintentional, and we wish to credit all those who have contributed to this sermon. Soli Deo Gloria.