

October 25, 2009

# Westminster Presbyterian Church

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## Sermons

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### **Are There Luggage Racks on Hearses?** by The Reverend Dr. George H. McConnel

Luke 12:13-21

The good life - what is it? Could you describe it? When asked by a reporter, one woman in Kansas City said, "The good life is when you aren't up to dabbling in luxuries but have lots more than the necessities." How's that for an answer? The good life—a Bostonian described it as, "Any place with nice lawns and a quiet suburban street." To the average citizen, concludes a newspaper report, the good life means about \$85,000 a year, a seven-room house in the suburbs, two cars and three weeks of vacation. Maybe some of us would settle for that. What is the good life to you?

It would be interesting, I think, for us to compare our answers with other people's at other times in history. Most of us today probably had a glass of orange juice for breakfast. Three hundred years ago not even the King of England had tasted orange juice. Most of us drove to church today. Every car has more power than any factory in the 18th century. Think of it—our cars—mini-power plants at our disposal just to take us where we want to go. Then there are planes, computers and iPhones.

Who 200 years ago could have dreamed of such a good life? But it's frustrating and even a little frightening to know that we have so much, yet gain satisfaction from so little; to know the blessings of the world are ours, yet we remain so empty. With the good life so accessible, why does our life go so flat? Why **does** our life go so flat?

The answer is partially explained in our scripture lesson - the parable of a small barn and a big fool. There's something about Jesus' story of the successful man that haunts us. The man in the story is

shrewd and practical; he has all the marks of a good businessman. He has expanded his output to the limits and is still going strong. In the realms of finance, he thinks in big terms and moves with a sure step. He has everything he wants. Yet, in the end, that is what bothers us. The story is about the person so many of us idolize: the person we want to be. And Jesus called him a fool.

In that brief paragraph the rich man refers to himself no less than twelve times: "My crops, my grain, my goods, my barns," he repeats. But in what sense were they his? Did he invent the laws of nature? Could he control the seasons? Was he responsible for his abilities? He died that night, and those barns and crops were still there after he was gone. They didn't belong to him after all. They were only lent to him to use. He thought he owned them, but in the last analysis, the only thing we own is who we are.

In his book, *Small Is Beautiful*, E. F. Schumacher, an English economist writes:

"In the excitement over the unfolding of our scientific and technical powers, modern humanity has built a system of production that ravishes nature, and a type of society that mutilates human beings. If only there were more and more wealth, everything else, it is thought, would fall into place. Money is considered to be all-powerful; if it cannot actually buy nonmaterial values, such as justice, harmony, beauty, or even health, it can circumvent the need for them or compensate for their loss. The development of production and the acquisition of wealth have become the highest goals of the modern world in relation to which all other goals have come to take second place."

Do you hear him? Above the noise in our daily lives, above the noise within ourselves, do you hear a Galilean, who possesses the treasures of peace and love and truth saying to us materialists, "You fools!"

In his bestselling book, *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, Stephen Covey suggests an interesting exercise. Covey asks his readers to picture themselves at a funeral of a good friend.

"In your mind's eye," says Covey, "see yourself going to the funeral of a loved one. Picture yourself driving to Westminster, parking the car, and getting out. As you walk inside this sanctuary you notice the flowers, the soft organ music. You see the faces of friends and family you pass along the way. You feel the shared sorrow of losing, the joy of having known, that radiates from the hearts of the people there.

"As you walk down to the front of the room and take your seat, you suddenly come face to face with a surprise. The bulletin has your name on it. This is your funeral, three years from today. All these people have come to honor you, to express feelings of love and appreciation for your life.

"As you wait for the services to begin, you look at the bulletin in your hand. There are to be four speakers. The first is from your family. The second speaker is one of your friends, someone who can give a sense of what you were as a person. The third speaker is from your work or profession. And the fourth is a pastor from this church.

"Now think deeply. What would you like each of these speakers to say about you and your life? What kind of husband, wife, father, or mother would you like their words to reflect? What kind of son or daughter or cousin? What kind of friend? What kind of working associate?

"What character would you like them to have seen in you? What contributions, what achievements

would you want them to remember? Look carefully at the people around you. What difference would you like to have made in their lives?"

Covey calls this *habit* "Beginning with the end in mind." To begin with the end in mind means to start with a clear understanding of your destination. It means to know where you're going so that you better understand where you are now and so that the steps you take are always in the right direction.

It is incredibly easy to get caught up in the success trap, in the "busyness" of life, to work harder and harder at climbing the ladder of success only to discover it's leaning against the wrong wall. It is possible to be busy—very busy—without being very effective.

People often find themselves achieving victories that are empty, successes that have come at the expense of things they suddenly realize were far more valuable to them. People from every walk of life—doctors, teachers, actors, politicians, business professionals, athletes, plumbers, and farmers with small barns—often struggle to achieve a higher income, more recognition or a certain degree of professional competence, only to find that their drive to achieve their goal blinded them to the things that really mattered most and now are gone.

I have been a Presbyterian minister for 31 years. During that time I have had the privilege of ministering to hundreds of people in the last days of their life. Not once in all my experience has anyone said to me in that situation, "You know, I wish I had spent more time at the office," or "I wish I had made more money." "I wish I hadn't given this or that away." Without fail the comments are more like this. "I wish I had been a better parent." "I should have taken church more seriously." "Why didn't we ever take that trip to Europe with the kids?"

How different our lives are when we really know what is deeply important to us, and, keeping that picture in mind, we manage ourselves each day to be and to do what really matters most. If the ladder is not leaning against the right wall, every step we take just gets us to the wrong place faster. I think Covey is right. We may be very busy, we may be very efficient, but we will never be truly effective until we begin with the end in mind.

If you carefully consider what you want to be said of you in the funeral experience, you will find your definition of success. It may be very different from the definition you had assumed. Perhaps fame, achievement, money, or some of the other things we strive for are not even part of the appropriate wall.

Several years ago I had the sad occasion of officiating at the funeral of one of my best friends. Larry Edwards died at 60 from cancer. He had the same kind of cancer as the pro golfer Paul Azinger, and he got it the very same week. It's 85 to 90% curable. Larry was one of the 10% that didn't respond to any kind of treatment. The week Larry died Paul Azinger was back playing golf on the Pro Tour.

Ten days before my friend Larry died, I drove from Dayton to visit him in Rochester, NY and to plan the funeral. Now, you should know that in many ways Larry is the modern day equivalent of the successful farmer in Jesus' parable. He had graduated # 1 in his class at Rochester Institute of Technology and with honors from the Harvard Business School. He was president of a small bank that was taken over by Chase Manhattan and later Head of Redevelopment for the City of Rochester. None of that seemed to matter the day we visited, ten days before his death. Here is what my friend Larry said. I wrote it down and repeated it at his funeral.

"I believe in God. I believe in the life ever after. I believe that in some form I will be reunited with those

who I love. God will take care of me.” And then he said this, “You know if I were to do it all again I’d make some different decisions. We make the wrong compromises. It’s not the ‘chase.’” (We laughed at the pun). “If I were to do it over I’d favor the family more and the church.”

“Begin with the end in mind.” What I think Covey is saying in his book, and my friend Larry was saying on his death bed, and Jesus is saying in his parable is this: *What you clutch in your hands and list in your portfolios and lock in your safety deposit boxes could be taken from you in a flash. Then what? We all know that there are no luggage racks on hearses!*

Dr. Holt Hughes, a bishop of the Methodist Church a generation ago, preached one Sunday on the text: “The earth is the Lord’s and the fullness thereof; the world and they that dwell therein.” He made the point that all that we are, and all that we own, is a free gift from God.

One of the church members, a successful contractor, was obviously upset going out the door, and invited the bishop to take a drive with him that afternoon. Together, they drove out to a new development that the contractor was building, and he pointed with great pride to a row of houses and said, “Bishop, I built those houses, and I own them. Do you mean to tell me they are not mine?” Dr. Hughes thought for a moment and then replied, “Ask me that question one hundred years from now.”