

**First United Methodist Church
618 Eighth Street
Columbus, IN 7201**

**Rev. Howard E. Boles
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“The Values by Which We Live: Understanding Worth”
Text: 1Timothy 6:6-19

Let me begin with a story that is a favorite of mine. It begins with a fisherman resting comfortably in the shade of an elm tree. A rich man came along and asked him what he was doing and the fisherman replied, “I’m resting.”

The rich man was surprised by this and asked the fisherman why he was resting on such a beautiful day when it was still great fishing weather. The fisherman replied, “I’ve caught all the fish I need, so now I’m resting.”

The rich man was shocked by this and said, “But why wouldn’t you go out and catch more fish.” The fisherman pushed his hat aside and asked, “What would I do with more fish?”

The rich man explained that if he continued fishing he could get more fish, earn more money, even buy a bigger boat.” The fisherman asked what he would do with a bigger boat.

The rich man continued to explain simple economics to the fisherman. “If you had a bigger boat,” he continued, “You could catch more fish and if you caught even more fish, then you could buy more boats. And if you bought more boats, you could hire people to work for you.”

The fisherman looked puzzled by this and said, “But what would I do then?” Pleased to have pointed out the obvious conclusion of more boats the rich man answered, “If you had people working for you then you could relax and enjoy the day.”

The fisherman responded, “That’s exactly what I was doing until you came along.”

It is about finding contentment. Let me begin by saying that, in spite of the lead story, I recognize that for some, contentment is found in things like work and success and accumulating material goods. This is not a sermon that seeks to take away those ambitions. Rather, I believe that this sermon and the biblical verses upon which it is founded, is about an additional model of success.

A recent internet article captured my attention with its provocative title, “My Life Began the Day I Lost \$250,000.” In this article Michael Thompson tells about an investment property he had worked on that was ready to be sold for a huge profit. Instead he received a phone call stating that his business partner’s father had transferred the property into his own name, sold it and he would be receiving nothing. He began that day thinking he was about to make a huge profit only

to find out that he was flat broke. He fell apart. For almost two years, he struggled with depression.

For reasons he doesn't explain in the article, after two years, he loaded his backpack with some clothes, a few books and other scattered belongings and boarded a plane for Spain. Upon arriving there, he felt the burdens begin to lift. He began eating well, walked everywhere, and improved his physical health. He allowed himself to be playful, followed his curiosity and pursued work that brought him satisfaction. He surrounded himself with people seeking to make the world a better place. He learned to smile without having to fake it.

Eight months later, he was in a serious relationship and his life was filled with meaning and beauty. Ten years have passed since that time and he has found the satisfaction that was missing in his life. He ends his article saying of he and his wife, "We live in a slow country town. Our apartment is small. We share one car. I can't remember the last time either of us bought new clothes. But we have each other and our two little boys. That [business deal] may have cost me \$250,000---but the journey it took me on was worth every penny."

The reading from Paul's first letter to Timothy stresses this same point. Like the present day, in biblical times there were many who measured success by one's wealth. A healthy bank account is a symbol of success. But Paul will point out that a greater value is found in contentment or satisfaction. Where will we find the deepest satisfaction in life? It is most often found in the intangible things. Love given and love received. Deep friendships, fulfilling things to do. We don't receive a monthly accounting of these things or an indication of whether they are rising or falling like the stock market. They are not easy to measure, but we feel their presence in meaningful ways.

I remember a friend who wanted to have a going away party. She wasn't moving or traveling. She was dying. And rather than waiting until she was dead and having her friends come and celebrate her life, she invited them while she was still living. When I arrived at her home, I could hear the party before I even walked through the door. There was a lot of laughter and cutting up. To an outsider there would have been no indication that the party was tinged with somberness. The host was weak and tired, but she found the energy for one speech on her back patio. With everyone around she thanked them for what they had contributed to her life...they had been there for her in times of need, they had encouraged her when she was weary, they had made her laugh when she was feeling down. And she concluded by lifting her wine glass above her head and saying, "I am a wealthy woman."

She wasn't talking about money or material goods. She was looking at the depth of friendships and recognizing that these people made her wealthy beyond measure. She was coming to the end of her life and taking stock. And when she did an accounting of her life, she found that it had been a good life.

This is the kind of wisdom that Paul is trying to impart to his fellow evangelist. Pursue those things that are of great meaning and significance but have no particular price tag. You cannot go to a store and buy a friend. This is something that has to be nurtured throughout a lifetime,

sprinkled with a measure of laughter and playfulness, forgiveness and understanding, patience and perseverance. Perhaps they are valuable because they take time to cultivate.

Paul names some of the things that are of the greatest value, things like righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance, gentleness. This is not an all-inclusive list but they are a good starting point. These are the things that matter in life. And none of these can be purchased outright nor can they be attained overnight. They require a lot of work, but the work is worth the sense of satisfaction that it provides.

I look at this reading as the sharing of wisdom from an elder to a young person. We don't know a lot about Timothy and I would love to hear his side of things. Like many young people, did he receive this wisdom and shrug it off, only to learn later how true it was? Or was he wise enough to heed this advice and learn at a young age what it often takes us decades to learn?

It reminds me a story Parker Palmer tells in his autobiography "Let Your Life Speak." At a time when he was still searching for what to do with his life, Palmer was offered the chance to be the president of a small educational institution. He visited the campus, interviewed with the administrators and was told that the job was his if he wanted it. He was certain that this was the right opportunity for him. It was not only a great job, but would be a wonderful stepping stone to bigger and better things down the road.

Before accepting the position, he asked some friends to help him decide. He convened six friends in what the Quakers call a clearness committee. In good Quaker tradition, they believe that the answers we seek are within us, we just have to clear away all the distractions and discern what God is calling us to do. So these friends met not to advise Parker about what to do, but to ask guided questions so he could discover that for himself.

With great wisdom they asked him many questions including, "What do you think you would enjoy most about being the president of this institution?" Parker thought about it for a while and responded, "Well, I would not like having to attend all those meetings, and I wouldn't like having to ask for money all the time, and I wouldn't like giving up my writing and teaching..." The friend who asked the question interrupted him and repeated, "I asked you would you would most like."

Parker thanked him for the clarification and then resumed, "I would not like having to wear a suit and tie all the time, I would not like giving up my summer vacations..." Again the friend interrupted and told him he was not answering the question. "What would you most like," he reiterated.

In the smallest of voices he responded, "I guess what I would like most is getting my picture in the paper with the word *president* under it." His friends paused to let that statement sink in. They didn't judge him, but let him reflect upon what he had just said. Finally one of the friends asked, "Parker, can you think of an easier way to get your picture in the paper?" The answer became clear to him. This was not the right job for him. It was a great job for someone, but not him. If he accepted it, the results would not be good for him nor for the school. He didn't know what he should do, but he knew this was not it.

Paul is imparting his wisdom to a young man, perhaps wisdom that is distilled from his own personal experiences. In the course of things, you may become wealthy. Paul doesn't discourage this, only says that our material wealth should be a means of carrying out the deeper values that we hold. Money is not evil. It is a tool for fulfilling the deeper values of our lives.

It reminds me of the line from Anthony De Mello's book, "The Song of the Bird." The young husband says to his wife, "I'm going to work hard, and someday we are going to be rich." She simply responds, "We are already rich, dear, for we have each other. Someday maybe we'll have money."

Paul is inviting Timothy and all those around him to take an accounting of their lives. But as you add things up, remember to count the things of greatest value, the things that are too precious to replace, the things whose worth is beyond measure. Cherish those things. Cultivate them, seek them out and nurture things like love and faithfulness, kindness and compassion, measure the friendships and take stock in the kind deeds you share and those that come back to you. In the biggest picture of life, hold onto the things that truly matter and nurture those gifts.