

Proper 21**1 Timothy 6:6-19, Luke 16:19-31****Pastor Chris Bellefeuille****September 26, 2004****Centered Life Series #3**

There is not much about today's Scripture readings that make any of us very comfortable. Some of us are quite wealthy and nearly all of us are wealthy compared to national and world standards. And it leaves us all a bit unsettled to hear these words. And although it might be tempting, my job is not to make you feel better about what you have heard. There are times when it is important to sit with the discomfort that Scripture evokes in us and listen to it. What is that discomfort telling you?

On some level, we all live with discomfort as we examine our lives. Certainly, there are those among us who are suffering real injustices, losses and griefs. But beyond that we have each experienced a sense of imbalance or incongruity, a yearning for more meaning, more value or a sense of being centered. Scriptures like we heard today can exacerbate some or all of those feelings in our lives.

Last week Pastor Wayne talked with you about living out your callings in your vocation, your daily work. This week I would like to talk with you about living out your callings in the rest of your life: that time outside the work place. It can be in this, our private lives, where we often feel most acutely that vague sense of wanting more, the sense of things that aren't quite lining up the way we thought: we run short of time, of money, of energy, of sleep. We eat poorly, don't get enough exercise or spend as much time with our families as we want. But any attempt to think about how to do better often leaves us feeling just as unsettled with an added layer of guilt. How do we gain a center, how do we deal with those vague longings?

God desires that we live lives in service to God, lives of discipleship. And we have each been uniquely gifted for that task. The problem is that we have limited our understanding of serving God to things that involve the words: committee, mission, evangelism or church. And these are good and important things. But our service to God is not limited to the things that fall neatly into those categories. Everything, every moment of our lives can be service to God. How?

Try this definition: A Centered Life is a life where we live out the values that have been shaped and informed by our Christian faith in everything we do. (Repeat) It would be tempting to provide a list of what those Christian values are. But as this election has made crystal clear, there is not single list of Christian values. For example, we would all agree on the dignity of human life. But we represent a broad spectrum of views on things like reproductive rights, stem cell research and capital punishment. We can all agree that people should have the right to feed, clothe and shelter themselves but we would have a hard time agreeing on how to make that happen. There are deeply faithful, thoughtful, prayerful people across the entire spectrum on any given issue. The point is, no one can tell you what exactly your faith-based values are or what they should be. That is why a Centered Life requires of each of us some time for self-examination and prayer.

If you think about every moment of your life as a moment of discipleship, it can be a bit overwhelming. But every moment of your life is an opportunity for discipleship. God has given each of us many great gifts: like time, money, material things, relationships and our particular talents. As Christian people, we use all of these gifts to live out our values in the world. Think of discipleship as minute-by-minute stewardship of these gifts: how are they being spent, to what purpose are they being directed? We are constantly making choices about how we use those gifts. Whether it feels like it or not, everything we do in our day is a choice.

For example, if your baby cries, you feed him. That is a choice. The rain starts to blow in the windows and you close them. That is a choice. As you are driving you approach a stop sign and you stop. That is a choice. We make choices all the time. And the choices we make are a mark of our values. We feed our baby because we love him and want him to grow healthy and strong. We close our windows because we have worked hard for our home and it is good stewardship to protect it. We stop at the stop sign because it is a matter of law and safety. We signal to the world the values of love of family, good care of our resources and respect for the common good.

Now see if you can apply this way of thinking about things even more broadly. Everything you do reflects your values. Think for a moment: name five of your top values. (Pause) When you get home today I want you to write them down. Next, I would like you to make a list of all the ways you spend your time. Make a list of the daily things: eating, bathing, reading the paper. Then make a list of weekly things, like laundry, worship, taking out the trash. Leave nothing out. It will take about 15 minutes. Now take a look at your list. If someone else were to look at that list, what would it tell them about your values? What does it tell you? And does it reflect the five values you thought about.

Let me give you a personal example of what this might look like. At the top of my list of values is my husband Ted. Followed closely by our kids. But Ted is the most important thing in my life. Even the kids know that. Well, I did this exercise of listing how I spend by time. On my list you would find weekly coffee with Pastor Wayne. Because Pastor Wayne and I want to do the best job we can serving you, we need to keep our relationship strong and our communication clear. To do that we meet for coffee at the beginning of each week. You would also find on my list a weekly church staff meeting. It is important for us to be a good team. Well, weekly anything with Ted is NOT on that list. Ted is my number one value and there is not one dedicated time for Ted. We talk each day and go on dates from time to time. But anyone looking at my list would not be able to tell by the way I spend my gift of time that my husband is the number one value in my life. Taking care of the gift of my marriage is an important part of serving God, of having a Centered Life. Ted and I have now committed to a weekly lunch. Please pray that we will succeed!

There can be pleasant surprises on the list too. Another weekly entry for me is laundry. Laundry takes a great deal of time and there are a lot of other things I could do with that time. But strangely, I like to do laundry. I love the smell of clothes right out of the dryer. I love making neatly folded stacks of clothes for my family. It is one way that I can show my love and care for them in a tangible way every week. What a wonderful thing it is to realize that I am serving God by taking care of my family and our clothes with love. (And no, I will not come to your house to do your laundry.) Whenever we are stewarding the gifts in our lives with love or with joy, we are serving God.

So I encourage you to go home and make a list of the way you spend your time. (I have left instructions on how to do this on the table in the narthex.) Then make a list of the way you spend your money and do the same exercise. Ask yourself: what values does my list reflect? How am I stewarding the gifts that God has given me? By looking at the list you can find the inconsistencies between what you really value and what you commit your gifts to.

Wherever your list reflects the values shaped by your faith is a place where you are serving God. Where your list does not match your faith values, you might see an opportunity to do something new. You might add things to your calendar, you might take things off, you might switch things around. Keep in mind...you do not have to like doing something for it to be important: like cleaning your house. But if you think about doing it because it keeps your family healthy and preserves an important financial asset, maybe the way you think about cleaning will change. Even if it is never fun, it can still be done as an act of service.

What I like about this way of thinking about your life is that each of our values are subtly different and the way we use our time, money, talents, and care for our relationships will look different for each of us. But each minute of everyday is a discipleship minute, even the moments spent on fun and relaxation. But we feel more centered, less anxious, more integrated when what we do reflects more closely what we really value. And those values are shaped and formed by the grace and forgiveness we have received from God. It can be a painful thing that calls us to change. But it can also be an assurance that our daily life is our daily service to God, when we are tending the gifts that God has bestowed on us. A life of daily service can be a powerful witness to the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

So when you hear scriptures that trouble you, that tug at something within you, take the time to listen and to pray. God will use those moments to teach and guide you to a way of being that is more fulfilling and peaceful than you may know now. You are all living lives of greater service than you realize. God has gifted you for that very purpose. Now it is for you to discover how and we are here to help you. God's blessing on your every moment.

Amen.