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New Year's Resolutions: What Do You Really Want?

(Luke 12: 22, 29-34 NRSV)

22 "He said to his disciples, "Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat, or about your body, what you will wear." . . .
29 "And do not keep striving for what you are to eat and what you are to drink, and do not keep worrying. 30 For it is the nations of the world that strive after all these things, and your Father knows that you need them. 31 Instead, strive for his kingdom, and these things will be given to you as well. 32 "Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom. 33 Sell your possessions, and give alms. Make purses for yourselves that do not wear out, an unfailing treasure in heaven, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys. 34 For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."

I.

May I begin with a point of personal privilege? I want to thank all of you who offered your sympathy and prayers on the death of my mother this past Christmas Eve. We felt those thoughts and prayers all the way from here to Iowa and back. They've meant the world to me. Between the travel, the memorial service planning that falls to an only daughter, and the unexpected joy and challenge of also preaching my mother's memorial service sermon, I haven't had a chance to respond personally to your many emails and cards. But believe me, they have each been read and treasured. I don't know how

people do this without church. I couldn't have gotten through the past week without you and without Chuck, who was, of course, a wonder of support and love. Thank you all! And now. . .to the gospel:

This morning, I invite you to leave the beauty of a winter morning in the Colorado mountains and join me on the side of a hill in Judea, sitting on dry ground, in the warmth of the sun, the smell of sage and olive and rosemary in our nostrils, the feel of sand and grit between our toes as we listen to the words of Jesus Christ. If we had all day like the people he was talking to did, we could look at the entire sermon he preached on the side of the hill, the sermon that the church has come to call "the sermon on the mount." In this wonderful sermon, he has some things to teach us about our stuff, our overflowing closets and garages and storage sheds and how that stuff can begin to get in the way of our joy. Then he gives us a few impossible and lovely and wise words about worry. Our worry. And the way it can keep us from doing and being all that God has called us to be and do. Finally, he closes this lovely section of his teaching by admonishing us to live simple lives, generous lives. Listen to his words:

"Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom. THE WHOLE KINGDOM!! Sell your possessions, and give alms. Make purses for yourselves that do not wear out, (such as) an unfailing treasure in heaven, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."

Whenever I think of this teaching of Jesus, I think of my check register and my monthly Visa bill. And I think to myself, "**Where my money is going, that is where my true heart is!**" There are months when that thought makes

me wince!

II.

Let me say it another way, asking us all in the form of a New Year's resolution: what is it that **we really and truly want for 2011**? As a congregation, as families, as individual men and women of faith, what is it that we really and truly want?

There was a survey done just last month by the Pew Research Center¹, asking Americans that very question: what do you really want? What do you hope and dream for? And in almost every case, Americans answered by describing something they someday hoped to buy: a house, a vehicle, a boat, a flat screened television. Isn't that kind of sad?

So let me ask it of you in yet another way: do you buy lottery tickets? If suddenly, you won the lottery, and if on the day you were being handed that big oversized check in front of the press and a reporter asked you: "What are you going to do with it? What is it you'd really, truly want to do with that sudden wealth?"

Or imagine the question not in terms of money, but in terms of time. Is there anyone here who isn't always busy, with more **to do** than time to do it? Imagine then, just imagine that somehow, magically you are given a week, out of nowhere; an entire week with absolutely nothing you **have** to do; not a single obligation or expectation. And the sidewalks are shoveled

¹<http://people-press.org/reports/pdf/686.pdf> *The Pew Research Center For The People & The Press*, December 15, 2010.

and the house is clean and the garage somehow magically organized! You can really do anything you want for an entire week! What do you most desire to do? Where does it take you?

You realize, don't you, that according to our Lord Jesus Christ, your answer to that question is a pretty fair index to your **real** religion? This is what reveals to us the real name of **our one true god**: what it is we desire when we are alone; what we do when the time and the money becomes available to us; when the opportunity comes for each of us to reach for what we most deeply desire. What is it that **you** really, truly want?

III.

The answer we give to that question may not only tell us the name of our god. The answer will also tell us our **destiny**. The Psalms were the prayers and hymns and contemporary praise songs of Jesus' life. And one of them includes this line: "Take delight in the Lord, and God will give you the desires of your heart."² "Take delight in the Lord, and God will give you the desires of your heart." Now on the face of it, this is a ridiculous claim, especially as expounded by what is popularly known as "prosperity theology." Do you know what that is? Prosperity theology claims that if you and I are doing what God wants us to be doing, God will bless us with good things. But you and I know people who do the will of God daily and yet are not blessed with good things. You and I both know people who have desired important things, wanted them deeply over a long time and yet did not receive them. Think of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. He had a dream.

²Psalms 37:4

He dreamed of a day when his children (and yours and mine) would be judged, not by the color of their skin but by the content of their character. He worked for that dream. He prayed for that dream. He desired it with his whole heart with such conviction that he was willing to die for it. And indeed he did die for it! And he died long before he saw Jim Crow laws ended in the South. And you and me, we've still work to do before the ravages of racism are wiped clean from this world.

And yet, Dr. King prayed Psalm 37 along with Jesus: *God will give you the desires of your heart.* And what if that claim **is true** in a far deeper sense? What if it is true that what you and I long for the most really does determine our destiny? What if we will ultimately get, more or less, what we've been longing for the most? For example, if what we want most is personal gratification, or if what we want most is material things, or if we want to be left alone, or we want the right to remain angry. . . maybe we will indeed get just those very things! (And maybe that's the very best definition of hell.)

And if, by contrast, we want to be whole, if we want spiritual health and healthy love, if what we want most is what is right and just, if what we want most is God and God's goodness and love, then these are the things we shall have, in a shadowed mirror, imperfectly to be sure, in this life but oh how perfectly in paradise! What if we really do get that which we long for the most?

IV.

But what if we long for it all? Ah, there's the rub, isn't it? This is

where most of us are, I think. We **want** God. . .and we want personal gratification. We want justice. . . and we want our own way. We believe in righteousness. . . and we want to always be right! We want to be generous to the church and to all the right causes and we also want to be able to buy all the stuff we want to buy! All of us want to be happy . . .and we'd like to retain the right to be angry at those who have hurt us and hurt those we love. We want stability and calm and quiet . . .and we want the excitement of the fresh and novel! We want to be healthy and we want all the things that make us sick! My friends, that kind of conflict can cost you your soul. Be pulled hard enough and long enough by opposing desires and eventually you **will** become undone.

It's a danger to human souls always and at all times. But surely it's an epidemic danger where we live. In our culture, powerful forces are constantly at work, forces who make it their business to inflame and agitate our desires, and the desires of all those to which we seek to reach out. From television and radio to magazines and display windows, we are hammered with a million images designed to stimulate and agitate desire. Have this! Drink this! Wear this! Drive this! Play this! Come on, enjoy this! Be this! Do this!! Want this! Is it any wonder that Superbowl commercials get as much press time in the news as the game itself? God help the children. And God help all of us keep our souls.

V.

Here in Colorado Springs, for \$75 to \$150 an hour, you can get

massaged or Aromatherapied or psychotherapied or you can hire a personal trainer or a life coach. And all of those things may help you and your family find some peace, for a little while, --but I'm guessing not for long. Not for long. Because what you and I need is a healing of our twisted and broken desire.

And that is exactly what the Psalmist offers thru God: a lasting cure! Jesus Christ offers it too. Being healed in Jesus' name means being made whole, not fragmented or split or divided; but unified, simplified, gathered into one, whole desire. You see, desire is good. God has desire. Scripture describes a God who sighs with great longing and desire. The works of God's fingers, the stars in the heavens and the snow upon the fertile earth are all the result of God's deep desire. You and I and our children and our neighbors are the result of God's deepest desire. And we, who were created in the image of God are rightly and righteously to have a huge longing, to know a deep desire.

But in us, desire threatens to go crazy. It has become twisted and distorted. It doesn't know any more what it wants. I mean, ask yourself how hard it is to keep a New Year's resolution beyond January and you will know how easily Godly desire, healthy desire is broken. And I would be willing to wager that every conflict in your family and in your own heart of hearts, not the temporary ones but the recalcitrant ones, the conflicts that keep coming round and round again, those conflicts are always about a desire that has been broken, twisted, distorted.

Indeed, the healing of our desire under God means that our longing is made whole. All our conflicted desires are gathered into God, who,

through the Holy Spirit of Jesus Christ breathes peace upon our false cravings and takes them deeper, to bring those multiplicity of desires under the one sovereign desire of love: in all things love. After all, what is it that you really want? What is behind all our other longings but love. **Love.** That is my New Year's prayer for all of us, brothers and sisters: *that God would heal our desires to bring them all under the One sovereign desire of love. In all things Love.* And those of you who want to explore what that might mean, at Pastor Chuck's invitation, I'll be offering a beginning class on **Jesus Christ as Holy Healer of Desire** for 6 Wednesdays (mornings @ 9:00am & evenings @ 7:00 pm at our home from February 2-March 9, 2011.) For now, let this be our prayer: *may God give us the desires of our hearts, and may all our desires be ruled by Love.* For that **is** the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. And for that gospel, Thanks be to God! Amen.