

Matthew 4: 8-10

Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendour; and he said to him, 'All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.' Jesus said to him, 'Away with you, Satan! for it is written, "Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him." '

Years ago I was on the Red Clay mission trip in Cedartown, Georgia, with the youth group from the Briarcliff United Methodist Church. It was a pretty interesting experience because groups from 3 or 4 churches would come together to work on homes in the Rome/Cedartown/Cave Spring area, dividing up into work teams made up of a few people from each church. It gave the youth and us leaders the opportunity to get to know people from other churches as we worked on basic home repair. This particular year I was a team leader, which meant I was responsible for knowing and leading the project, keeping track of our supplies, and more importantly, helping to create a positive team environment as we worked all week. I decided to start the week off with a quick and easy get-to-know-you activity. The team of 8 sat in a circle, shared our names, and answered this question: what do you want to be when you grow up? One guy in my group who was about 15 said, "I want to be retired." We all giggled, and the younger members of the group tried to totally check out because they couldn't relate to this at all. I asked him why he said this, and I'll never forget how he responded: "... 'cause my grandmother is retired, and she has the best life of anyone I know."

I suppose this is the dream with which I grew up, and perhaps you did, too. I would graduate high school headed for college; I would graduate from college ready to start my career making money doing something I enjoy. I would then be able to buy a house that would be paid for by the time I retired at about age 60. At that point, I'd travel to see friends, family, and the parts of the world that I had not yet seen. I could do it like the woman in another congregation of mine who sold her home when she retired and bought an RV so that she could trade her mortgage payments for seeing the United States. And for the most part, I've kind of been on track with this dream. I graduated from seminary and went straight to work. I have a regular paycheck and healthcare coverage. Most of my friends can't believe that I have a pension—that seems to be unheard of anymore. When the bills come each month, we are able to stay on top of them, and we just bought a home this year that we hope to have paid off by the time we retire, whether we are able to live in it for the next 30 years or not.

And yet we joke nervously about our future. We often find ourselves passing by Emory's campus, and when Joy is with us we always tell her that this will be her home one day, too. "Get used to this place, Joy," I always say. "This will be your place, too, just like it's mine. Just don't end up at the theology school; you can go to the medical, business, or law school so that you can support Mommy and Daddy when we are retired and pensions and Medicare are things of the past."

My best friend lives in Tempe, Arizona. Recently we were talking about our children and how quickly they are growing up. Hers are 3 and 1, and Joy is 2. We talked about how hard it is for us to imagine now a life without them, but one day they will leave us to pursue their own lives. We talked about how old we'll be when they are ready to leave home. She told me that she and her husband have worked out their plan to retire when she is 55. That way, their children will be in and finishing college and moving out on their own, and they'll be able to visit them whenever they like. And they'll be able to go wherever else they'd like to go, whenever they like. This conversation took place less than a year ago.

Her dream is to work a 35-year career and then to live, doing whatever she wants. My dream is similar to what I once heard former president Bill Clinton say: I want to have the financial resources to be able to have a safe place to live, to be able to travel occasionally, and to be able to buy a book or see a movie now and then for entertainment, and to give a tithe to the church as I was taught to do growing up—a lesson for which I am thankful and for which I thank my parents regularly and which I intend to pass on to my daughter. And now we buy board books and diapers in addition to movie tickets, and soon we'll have to buy 3 plane tickets when we travel father than a day's car ride. My dream has always been to work as long as I want to, not as long as I have to. I always dreamed that I would work, then retire, then have a happy, leisurely life, then die comfortably in my home. And I suspect these dreams are yours, too, at least in some way or another. They may have always been just that—dreams—but they were always out there in our collective conscience as possible.

And then our dreams turned to nightmares.

When I was a child, the first thing I ever really saved money for was an original Xavier Roberts Adoption Doll. Some of you in the room know exactly what I'm talking about. For the rest, the Adoption Dolls are the pre-cursors of Cabbage Patch Kids. They have cloth heads and are bigger. I think that doll cost about \$40—a lot of money for a 6-year-old. But I was a saver. I did extra chores around the house and saved and saved. At one point, my dad started talking to me about lifetime savings, trying to convince me to open a savings account at the bank. I insisted that this was a bad idea because, and I quote: "They won't give me *MY* money back." Perhaps I was wise beyond my mere 6 years.

The financial institutions of our nation have done some things that we cannot understand or explain and from which it feels that we will not recover in the foreseeable future. The mortgage crisis, the bank failures happening here and

around the world have propelled us into a time of panic and fear about what is to come. Banks are still closing. What is the European Union going to do about Greece? And yet, I call our attention today back to the brief passage from the gospel of Matthew in which Jesus is confronted by the devil during his time in the desert—the story we have come to call the Temptation narrative. You may remember that there are several ways in which Jesus is tempted to end his time of fasting and to reap the benefits of someone else's power and yet he remains steadfast in his discipline and faithfulness to God alone. The devil offers him the world and all the power he could imagine in this life. Jesus responds by saying that worship and service belong only to God and to no one or nothing else.

One of the things we've learned in this crisis is that we've based who we are on what we have rather than what we believe, what we can do, or (and I believe more importantly) with whom we are in relationship. Because we are gathered here for worship, we are saying something about who we are that transcends any of our material possessions, the size of our homes, the schools our children attend, the cars we drive, or the brands sewn into our clothing. We are finding our identity in being children of the living God, who formed us in God's own image, and whose image in us is not lost but can be recovered if we will turn away from the dreams which draw our attention to the accumulation of stuff and power and turn toward the God who calls us to build up resources to be shared and given to others.

Two weeks ago, Robin gave us an update on our Covenant Capital Campaign. We've been able to cross item number one off our to-do list of the most urgent needs of our sanctuary: the roof. Thanks to your generosity and the generosity of this community, we now move on toward finishing our goal of repointing the stone walls of this building, repairing the plaster on the walls where water leakage has damaged it, and replacing the board along the wall under the Resurrection Window. It took an enormous amount of courage for us to start a capital campaign in the midst of this nightmare of a national economy. But in doing so, we have said that it is not just important for us to fix this building but also to fix our neighborhood. Some probably thought we were crazy and irresponsible to start a campaign for this much money at this time, but it is written: "Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him." Worship God. Give all you have over to another being, to the relationship you have with God that calls you into a being that transcends your material wealth and power and place in society. It's a different kind of restraint—the kind that brings with it spiritual freedom to give yourself away in service to the needs of the world. Just as with this campaign, everything we do here bends toward seeking the reign of God in Christ in our world and in our lives. We feel a higher calling here than the vocational ambition which drives most of our waking hours. Here we begin to see how we can make a difference in the world of the others who find their relationship with God here and others around the world whose lives are benefited by the gifts that we bring. Here we begin to see that our talents *AND* our resources are needed by someone else. Here we can learn that by pursuing good financial practices as a congregation and as individuals, we can free ourselves from debt so that we are able to be in mission in the world.

Before we are ordained, all provisional Elders and Deacons in the United Methodist Church are asked a list of historic questions by our resident bishops. One of those questions is "Are you in debt so as to embarrass yourself and the church?" We all giggle when we answer, "No," because all of us have just finished 3 or more years of graduate school and know that most of us will never be making high salaries in comparison with our friends in the corporate workforce. But even more than that, I have begun to consider each year when I hear this question asked of the new ordinands at Annual Conference that debt which I owe to my relationship with God that has been spent on time with other things and pursuits which have pulled my hands and heart away from building the reign of Christ in this world with the help of the Holy Spirit. A key part of finding financial and spiritual freedom is found in simplicity and in exercising restraint. With the help of God we can simplify our lives and silence the voices constantly telling us we need more. We can live counter-culturally by living below, not above, our means. We can build into our personal budgets the money to buy with cash instead of credit. We can build into our own budgets and our church budget what we need to be able to live generously and faithfully.

So let your nightmares become dreams again. Dream about the freedom you can enjoy when your faith and your finances are put right—in the right order, with the right support. Dream about the ability to give to others who have lost jobs, homes, and hope. Put away the nightmare of spending more than you have and wondering how the next bill will be paid. We are working tirelessly at doing this with the money you are already giving to the ministry of this church. Join this 4-week journey of relationship—with your financial resources and with God—and be moved by the Holy Spirit into a new day of giving and living with enough: simply, generously, and with joy.

Amen.