

Our Balance Sheet

19 November 2006

Bible passages: (*The Message*)

Luke 12:15 “Life is not defined by what you have, even when you have a lot.”

Psalms 34:12 “Who out there has a lust for life? Can't wait each day to come upon beauty?”

Sermon nugget: Our lives are worth much more than the money and material assets we acquire.

Do you know what a balance sheet is? I'm sure our business types do, but the rest of us may have heard the term, and yet not be totally certain what it means. According to dictionary.com, a balance sheet, in its simplest definition, is “a statement of the financial position of a business on a specified date.” I suspect the same term can be used for an individual or institutional financial position as well.

This morning, I would like us to think about the fact that a statement of our financial position at any given time may, in fact, not be a valid statement at all. If it only measures money and assets, and only defines wealth in financial terms, I would submit to you that it is missing the boat. That's because I happen to believe that life is worth a great deal more than what we have or what we own.

That's what I want us to think about today. How would we describe our real balance sheet, not the one we have to have to start a business or buy something major. Rather, I'm talking about life balance sheet. Would we think of ourselves as rich or poor when it comes to measuring the worth of our life experiences?

The topic today came into being because of a column I read in *The Summit Daily News* when I was in Colorado last summer. It was written by a guy named Rich Mayfield who is a pastor in Summit County. He's sort of a local Tom Ehrlich, I think, and I try not to miss his weekly column when I'm out there.

The headline on this particular column began with the words, “What is wealth?” Let me share the first paragraph with you. Mayfield wrote, “According to economist Richard Easterlin, I am a wealthy man. According to just about any other financial indicator, I am anything but...but, thanks to the 80-year-old professor from the University of Southern California,

my wealth needs to be measured by more than the size of my bank account.”

He goes on to say that the professor's thesis is that life experiences can be quantified and even identified with corresponding financial equivalents. In essence, that's exactly what one of our Bible passages this morning is talking about. It reads like this: “Life is not defined by what you have, even when you have a lot.” Now, that's the version from *The Message*; *Today's English Version* puts it a little differently. It says, “Watch out and guard yourselves from every kind of greed, because your true life is not made up of the things you own, no matter how rich you may be.”

It's like a story about a couple at dinner one night. They were discussing a number of their affluent friends, and their lavish homes, expensive cars and their wonderful vacations. Seeming a bit disheartened about their own financial plight, the wife remarked to her husband, “Someday we'll be rich.” He reached out, took her hand and answered, “Honey, we are rich. Someday we'll have money.”

That's the kind of thing we're talking about this morning, and all-in-all, pretty self-explanatory. However, it causes me to think that if there are experiences that are life-giving and that can even be equated to a financial equivalent, there must also be experiences that are life-depleting—ones that detract from satisfaction and subtract from our overall balance sheet. In other words, some experiences help us grow richer, and others make us poorer.

So, let's start first to think about the things that might subtract from our life satisfaction and impoverish us. I suppose that is different from person to person, so all I can really reflect on are the things that tend to chip away at my personal sense of well-being, and you will have to do that for yourself.

For me, one of the things that's a minus from my life satisfaction and happiness score is harboring anger toward someone. When I feel maligned, I start out by being hurt and then anger takes over. I don't think of myself as a brooder, but I find that negativity sets in, and the anger isn't isolated to a single event or individual. It begins to permeate everything, and certainly depletes my capacity for enjoying life. So, I'd have to say that anger is one of the things for me that is a minus on my balance sheet. That's only a beginning point for me.

There are probably all kinds of things that we could name as minuses to our life satisfaction. It may be discrimination in the work place, or the unfair practices of our boss or supervisor. It could bickering and arguing with a family member, or a long-standing feud with a friend. It may be dealing with someone who keeps defending a position that only brings pain to others. These actions and others empty our accounts and diminish our balance sheet. So, I guess each of us needs to ask ourselves what it is that is a detraction from our life balance sheet, and what we can do to shift the balance.

Maybe one of the ways to move things around and improve our balance sheet is to focus on the things that contribute to a positive life. More times than not, it's the little things that make such a world of difference. Maybe it's an early morning walk, or spending some time by the lake. Perhaps it's gathering with a group of friends for dinner, or holding a grandchild on our lap. It may be watching a redbird perched in a tree, or basking in the glow of the beautiful fall colors, or seeing the sunshine glinting off the snow. We grow richer by the minute as we see our child take his or her first steps, or graduate from college, or meet their life mate.

Wayne Muller writes about a new definition of wealth in his book *Sabbath*. He says, "What if we were to expand our definition of wealth to include those things that grow only in time—time to walk in the park, time to take a nap, time to play with children, to read a good book, to dance, to put our hands in the garden to cook playful meals with friend, to paint, to sing, to meditate, to keep a journal. What if we were to live, for even a few hours, without spending money, cultivating time instead as our most precious resource?" That may not be exactly what the world around us rewards, but my guess is that you and I would have a lot more personal happiness and enjoyment of life if we committed to valuing our time well-spent as our most precious resource.

The reality is that not every part of the world values material gain the way we do here in the U. S. Take the little country of Bhutan, for instance. Until Rich Mayfield mentioned it in his column, I had never heard of the place. It seems that Bhutan has a state-sanctioned program that, instead of focusing on the development of an expanding gross National Product, focuses their resources toward expanding what they call their "Gross National Happiness." This

unusual concept places significant value on issues that might make economists and politician blanch, but it seems to work just fine for the people of Bhutan, who claim to be some of the happiest people on earth.

An unknown writer penned something called "Your Life Would be Richer—If." I'm going to change it a bit to read like this:

Our life would be richer if on this day, we will make an effort to:

Mend a quarrel.

Search for a forgotten friend.

Dismiss a suspicion and replace it with trust.

Write a letter to someone who misses us.

Encourage someone who has lost faith.

Keep a promise.

Forget an old grudge.

Examine our demands on others, and vow to reduce them.

Fight for a principle.

Express our gratitude.

Overcome an old fear.

Take two minutes to appreciate the beauty of nature.

Tell someone we love them.

Tell them again.

And again.

And again.

CLOSING:

The psalm that's our second Bible passage says this: "Who out there has a lust for life? Can't wait each day to come upon beauty?" How can you and I adjust our lives so that passage comes into being, so we have a lust for life? What can we do to focus on enhancing our real balance sheet? Today is a good day to start, and as we leave here this morning, I invite each one of us to finish the sentence for ourselves, and say, "My life will be richer if..."

Have a great Sunday, and go in peace. Amen.