Leave a Legacy!

Vienna Presbyterian Church
The Rev. Dr. E. Stanley Ott
Luke 12:13-21

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Tony Campolo told of a sociological study in which 50 people, all over the age of 95, were asked, “If you could live your life over again, what would you do differently?” Of the many answers, three were the most common. First, I would reflect more. Thirty years ago, I asked an audience of sixty pastors if they spend as much as two hours a week in reflection and planning to raise their hands. Not one hand went up. Now I ask for just one hour a week and get virtually the same results. We are not a very reflective people. Glenda has introduced us to the wonderful spiritual practice of Examen—a daily time to reflect on the consolations and desolations—the moments of encouragement and discouragement in your day, and to be aware of the presence of the Lord who loves you in all of them. Reflect more!

Second, I would risk more. I have worked with many hundreds of people working out new ways to move their lives and churches forward. I finally realized most people actually had a clue as to what they wanted to do, they just didn’t do it. Upon further analysis, it became clear the problem wasn’t ideas—how to raise a child, how to travel to a distant city, how to pursue a new initiative, how to take steps to heal an old bitterness—it was more about anxiety, the fear of taking the first step.

In my final lecture to a group of pastors in Osaka, Japan, I ran out of material 20 minutes early. Here in the States if you let a class out 20 minutes early there is dancing in the streets but there I knew I had to keep my mouth moving! So, I began to talk about fears I’ve had in my work—the anxiety of calling a busy or high level person to ask them to do something, the anxiety that precedes confronting a person about inappropriate behavior or an employee about inadequate work, the fear of asking someone for $500 or $5000 or $50,000. I suddenly realized the Japanese pastors weren’t taking notes. They were leaning over their tables glued to every word. While our culture is very different from the culture in Japan,
when it came to fear, we are exactly the same—and that experience led me to focus a great deal on what it is to have gumption, to trust God to put steel in your backbone, to do what those 95-year olds said to do: risk more!

I would reflect more, I would risk more and third, I would work to *leave a legacy*. That brings us to this morning’s text in Luke. We often think that a legacy is a gift you leave to someone by means of your will, but, more broadly, a legacy is anything that you leave behind that affects the lives of others. Think of Billy Graham’s legacy of talking about Jesus or Mother Theresa’s legacy of mercy or Martin Luther King’s legacy of dignity and freedom. You get the idea. When I think of my Louisiana grandparents, I think of the barn on their property full of letters, rugs and furniture that rats and weather ruined. But when I think of my grandmother, I always think of her legacy of love and my grandfather’s legacy of an entrepreneurial spirit.

Our text in Luke begins with someone who wants his brother to split the inheritance with him. Jesus replies, “Be on your guard against all kinds of greed because your life does not consist of the abundance of possessions.” Translation, your life is not your stuff—whether your stuff includes your titles, your accomplishments, your wealth or your possessions. Jesus goes on to talk about a rich man whose farm has done so well he puts all his efforts into building bigger barns to store all of his stuff so he can eat, drink and be merry, at which point God speaks to the man and says, “You fool. This very night your life on earth will end and then who gets all your stuff?” He concludes, 21 So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God.”

Instead of leaving a legacy of stuff in a barn, what kind of legacy could you leave that would be rich toward God? The kind my
grandparents left? Not the stuff in a barn but the influence of their lives. There are many great answers to what kind of legacy could you leave. I will suggest just two this morning. Leave a legacy of Christian faith and leave a legacy of Christian purpose. First, leave a legacy of Christian faith. If you are a believer in Jesus, a follower of Jesus, who were the people who introduced you to Jesus, perhaps when you were so young you don’t remember their names. It was Andre Kole, Josh McDowell and Mike Foster who introduced me to Jesus, and left a life-changing Christian faith legacy in my life. My friend Chuck Baily showed me a picture of him standing next to five men. It turned out he led the man next to him to faith in Jesus. That man led the next man in line to faith in Jesus and so on down the line. Each one left a legacy of Christian faith that multiplied to many others.

Consider Henry Heinz who founded the Heinz Company with its Heinz 57 Catsup. He put these words into his will: “I desire to set forth at the very beginning of this will as the most important item in it, a confession of my faith in Jesus Christ as my Savior. I also desire to bear witness to the fact that throughout my life, in which there were unusual joys and unusual sorrows, I have been wonderfully sustained by my faith in God through Jesus Christ. [now get this:] This legacy was left me by my consecrated mother, a woman of strong faith, and to it I attribute any success I have attained.” Wow! At the heart of a life of great joy and deep sorrow, the spiritual legacy his Mom left him carried him through.

Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise.” Deuteronomy 6:6-7

Pastor Pete has been encouraging all of us to be able to speak our personal story of coming to believe in Jesus in 100 words. That’s just five sentences. It’s something you may share to leave a legacy of Christian faith in the lives of other adults, and with children, too. Scripture says this about leaving a legacy of faith to children: “Keep these words that I am command-
ing you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise” Deuteronomy 6:6-7. Are you imparting a legacy of trust in Jesus to the children in your life? Do you talk about spiritual things? Do you read the Bible with them and discuss it? Do you pray with them? Who are the people in you life who know Jesus more because of you?

Leave a legacy of Christian faith and leave a legacy of Christian purpose. There are many expressions of Christian purpose in the Bible that you are quite familiar with. “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, soul and strength.” “Love one another even as I have loved you.” “Go into all the world and make disciples of every nation.” “Act justly, show mercy, and walk humbly with your God.” In recent weeks, Pastor Pete has been talking about three commitments of the Christian faith that capture these various expressions of Christian purpose: commit to Christ, commit to the body of Christ and commitment to the work of Christ.

Those three commitments are what a legacy of Christian purpose is all about. Years ago, Bob Buford published the book Half Time. The sub-title is worth the book: Moving from success to significance. His whole point is simple. You work especially hard in the first part of life to establish basic security—a home and the things you need for life and to do well in your work—“success.” But there comes a time the question arises, “What am I doing that is of ongoing significance?” Actually, that’s not a question for the second half of life alone. If you would leave a legacy of Christian purpose, the significance that you know you want your life to count for, then you want to clarify just what is your real purpose, such as the three commitments.

A year ago, I mentioned a cartoonist from the 1920s by the name of Ralph Barton. At the age of 39, just before taking his own life, he wrote, "I have had few difficulties, many friends, great success-
es; I have gone from wife to wife and house to house, visited great countries of the world—but I am fed up with inventing devices to fill up twenty-four hours of the day.¹ A man defined by narcissism and self-absorption, which are the hallmarks of our own age, left a legacy of full barns and an empty life. He had it all, yet, he had nothing. He had no core purpose—no commitments to Jesus, to the body of Christ, to the work of Christ. Is your purpose truly to serve the Lord who loves you and the people God gives you?

This morning, in our passage from Luke, Jesus talks about a brother who is unhappy with the division of the family inheritance. We have no idea why none of his parents’ estate was given to him. We do know he is bitter about it. Jesus then talks about a man who dies with his barns full of stuff. Clearly, one aspect of the legacy of Christian purpose is thinking through what happens to your possessions after you die. Through what is known as estate planning, you have the opportunity to pass on your values, not just your valuables and leave a legacy of blessing. If you do not plan for your inevitable death, your legacy may easily be one of bitterness and not blessing. I once saw the relationships among four members of my wider family destroyed over the way a will was written. I have seen other families hurt over items that were promised verbally to one child or another, but there was no will and someone else got it.

The truth is many of us don’t have up-to-date wills or legal trusts that protect our assets or possessions for our heirs. In fact, probate statistics show that over 60 percent of people have no plan at all!

Because of this staggering number, VPC is launching a new ministry, partnering with Financial Planning Ministry to provide

¹ Zuck, Roy B. (2009). The Speaker's Quote Book: Over 5,000 Illustrations and Quotations for All Occasions. p. 129.
estate planning for our church family. We will offer short seminars on May 18 and 19 about estate planning. Those who attend one of the seminars will have the opportunity to meet with an estate consultant one-on-one at a later date to create or amend an estate plan, including wills, trusts, guardianship and health directives, at no cost to you. This isn’t about leaving a gift to the church, as wonderful as that is, it’s about protecting your family and getting your financial legacy in order.

I’ve been thinking about the man Jesus described as building bigger barns but whose life counted for nothing but himself. I’ve asked myself the question, “Just what is the spark that turns a person outward and gives them a life-defining Christian purpose that is rich toward God?” Why did a Ralph Barton flit about the world with no purpose and what sparked Harry Heinz to put his entire personal and business life in service of Jesus? The answer is easy. The spark is Jesus!

Four years ago, Phil Kratovil, here at VPC, invited Jim Jeffery to a breakfast at the Vienna Inn where Phil shared the vision of a mission team that would go to Cuba to share the good news about Jesus. Jim shares he was at a very low point in his life at that time and he decided to take a baby-step in obedience because that was all he could manage, and he said yes to Phil. On that trip, they shared Jesus with 280 people of which 240 said yes to Jesus. Today, ten trips later to three countries, Jim has seen nearly 9000 people hear about Jesus, and almost 4,500 have said yes. As Jim says over and over, it’s been all God—that never in the lowest point in his life did he imagine what God would do. Jesus is the spark who turned Jim to a great and godly Christian purpose and Jesus will do the same for you. Whether your “barns” are large and full or small and empty, you, your life, is the life Jesus loves with all his heart. If you trust Jesus, you will find yourself leaving a
spiritual legacy as well as a life-changing legacy of Christian purpose in your family, in your work and in our wider world.

In the last act of John Van Druten's play, *I Remember Mama*, there is a scene about a man named Uncle Chris. Uncle Chris has just died, and the relatives have gathered to read the will. Most of them did not care for Uncle Chris but they did not want to miss the reading of the will. Maybe there will be something for them. Then Mama comes in to announce that there seems to be no will and no money either, but there is a notebook that is an account of the way Uncle Chris spent his money. Mama wants to read the notebook to the family.

"You know that Uncle Chris was lame?" she asked. "How he walked with a limp? It was his one thought, lame people. He would have liked to have been a doctor to help them. Instead, he helped in other ways. I will read the last page of his notebook. 'Joseph Spinelli, four years old. Tubercular left leg. $317.18. Walks now. Esta Jensen, nine years old, club foot $217.50. Walks now. Arn Solefelt, nine years old, fractured knee cap, $442.16.'

"Just then in the scene, the boy Arn Solefelt comes running into the yard where they can see him. Arn's mother says, “My Arn?” She is overcome. For she knew nothing of what Uncle Chris had done. And, then, after a moment, Mama continues. "It does not tell the end of Arn. I would like to write, 'Walks now… maybe even runs now'" Uncle Chris may not have been “rich” in money when he died but he was rich toward God. He left a remarkable legacy of love. He had people eyes, the eyes of Jesus that look at people with the kind of love that costs something and loves in very practical ways.

Reflect more—such as through the daily practice of Examen. Risk More—trust our Lord to put steel in your backbone and take that first step. Leave a legacy of Christian faith to the people in your life. Leave a legacy of Christian purpose that serves God and builds up people. Amen!

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