

"How Much Is Enough?"

Psalm 107:1-9; I Timothy 6:6-12, 17-19

Highlands Presbyterian Church, Columbus

May 31, 2015 – Trinity Sunday – Rev. Ronald Botts

As far back as I can remember I've had a fascination with radio. There's something magical in the ability of a little box of parts to pull in voices from both near and far. I guess I'm still captivated with that idea.

Apart from a crystal set, the first radio of my own was a birthday present from my parents. It was a Truetone set from Western Auto, a portable just like I asked for. The imitation leather case was filled with miniature tubes and it took two hefty batteries to power the radio, but I could take it anywhere. No cord could limit me. Why I could even play it in the car, a fact that did not necessarily amuse my father.

I used to keep a log of all the stations I heard. At night the atmospherics changed and signals would bounce back to earth hundreds or even thousands of miles from their origin.

Now some of you might say that one of the most exciting things from your youth was to lay in bed of a night and hear a train whistle in the distance. If you're young enough it might be to sneak your iPhone under the covers. For me it was to fidget with the dials of my receiver, a soft glow behind the tuning numerals, and to hear "This is WABC, New York." Now that was something. Or to hear WWL in New Orleans, WGN in Chicago, WBZ in Boston, or KOA in Denver.

There was one high-power station, KXEL in Waterloo, Iowa, that must not have had much local business after the hog and grain markets closed for the day, so they sold their late-night air time to radio evangelists. As a child I don't think I ever really connected these preachers with religion, at least not as I knew it. I regarded these fast-talking men as entertainers, though some were far more interesting than others.

My favorite, without doubt, was Rev. Ike. That's what he went by—just Rev. Ike. Maybe he was like Cher or Madonna and only had a first name. I never knew. Now Rev. Ike's contention was that God intended for everyone to be prosperous but, as many of us were far from that, it was obvious that we didn't understand how to bring this about. Fortunately, he would show us the way.

Rev. Ike's theme song, sung gospel style, was entitled "Money, Money, Money." I kid you not! Now this might seem somewhat crass to the uninitiated but, if it is in God's plan, who are we to criticize? He preached that it brings a smile to God's face whenever one of his children comes into new-found fortune. It's a blessing, a sign of favor, a gift in response to our demonstration of faith.

Rev. Ike would get all emotional whenever it came to prayer time. Then afterwards he'd play recorded testimonials from some of his devout listeners. They told how they had come into a big inheritance after listening to the program, or won a new Cadillac in a sweepstakes, or got

a fat promotion at work. And all those who had gained, and were obviously being looked upon well by God, shared one thing in common: they had all sent in a recent donation to Rev. Ike.

What they received in return for their "love" gift, was a prayer cloth personally selected for them by the good reverend. I never saw one, but I could image this to be some kind of handkerchief, possibly even one that had wiped the sweat of salvation from the brow of Rev. Ike himself. The suggested donation was just ten dollars, that to further the work of Rev. Ike to get out this good news. Of course the more devoted you were, and the more prayer cloths you sent for, the more that the Lord would be pleased by your sincerity. Rev. Ike assured us that God was aware and would not forget.

Well, Rev. Ike picked up on a long-standing idea in Christianity which claims that prosperity is a reflection of our righteousness. That is, if we are good enough, we will be tangibly rewarded by God. Poverty, conversely, is an indictment of our lack of faith.

Well, that makes some sense. Why not? We learn early on that if we do our chores, we get our allowance. For every A on our report card, we might receive a dollar for our good marks. Why wouldn't it make sense that God, as our heavenly parent, would think likewise?

Our text from Paul today speaks to money and contentment, goodness and reward, but not from the standpoint of cause and effect. My guess, too, is that Rev. Ike never preached from the sixth chapter of I Timothy. There Paul says, "Those who want to be rich fall into temptation and are trapped by many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, and in their eagerness to be rich some have wandered away from the faith..."

A wealthy employer once overheard one of his workers say: "If I only had a thousand dollars in the bank, I would be perfectly content." So he went up to her and said, "Since I would like to see someone who is content, I'm going to grant your desire." And he wrote a check in that amount and gave it to her on the spot. He turned away, but before he was out of earshot he heard her say to a co-worker, "Now why on earth didn't I say **five** thousand dollars?"

Note in our scripture this morning it doesn't say "money is the root of all evil" as we often hear it quoted. It says instead "the love of money is the root of all evil." Those are two quite different things.

Sorry Ike, but God never promises us material prosperity as a reward for devotion. Then again, the lack of it doesn't indicate a withholding of favor either. Money is neither good nor bad in its own right. It can buy weapons of destruction or vials of serum. It all depends on how it's used. The real danger in those crisp green bills is that they have a tendency to distract us from what is really important in life. Money, more than most temptations, tends to corrupt us. It distorts us from our greater potential and, in so doing, pushes God from the center of our lives.

Don't misunderstand, our passage today doesn't glorify poverty. It also doesn't make light of our needs for food and clothing and shelter. Nor does it condemn riches per se, though it advocates for the right use of what we hold in excess of basic necessities. We are to be generous and ready to share.

What Paul writes to Timothy as a reminder and warning is that the love of money can trip us up; and far from bringing us contentment it may only give us trouble. Instead of bringing us closer to God, it is likely to alienate us from God.

Paul talks about "fighting the good fight of faith." Part of that struggle has to do with what we are going to put higher in our lives. We can say anything we want, but our actions reveal our priorities: selfishness pushes us one way and selflessness pushes in another. Every day we fight this fight, not only in relation to money, but also as to how we spend our time and our energy. We continually have to make these kind of decisions.

There was a researcher who once taught at Harvard. He was a renowned scientist and one of the leading thinkers in his field. Once he got a letter from a group to come and give a lecture for its members. He wrote back that his research and writing was where he needed to put his efforts.

The society was unwilling to accept his rebuff and so contacted him again, stating this time that they were prepared to pay handsomely for the talk. The professor replied simply, "Your inducement is noted, but I can't afford to waste my time making money.

Making money a waste of time? It's almost sacrilegious to say in our society. Anyone who talks this way must be either a fool or crazy? Isn't this what we're supposed to be about?

So, what will it take to make you content? How do you measure that in your life: in dollars, in prestige, in advancement, in power? That's what much of life tells us is important. The Gospel, on the other hand, says that there is a different currency which is a far better indicator of contentment. Its coin of the realm is peace of mind and accomplishment and happiness. It trades in love and acts of kindness, and simple pleasures.

What will it take to make you content? That's a major factor in how you live your life. This will determine the course of your actions and define the person you really are. In an ultimate sense it will either put you on an endless pursuit for the unattainable, or bring you satisfaction by living in the way set out through our Creator's intent. It's an old truth, but it must be considered anew in every generation and by each person.

What will it take for you to be content? Consider that question carefully. On your answer hinges the future and it affects all the relationships in your life. More than anything, the answer defines and determines who you are and how you live.

What will it take for **you** to be content?