

“What Will It Take?”

Deuteronomy 30:1-4, 8-10; Colossians 1:9-12

Highlands Presbyterian Church, Columbus

October 25, 2015 – 22nd Sunday after Pentecost – Rev. Ronald Botts

Some of you may remember back to the early years of television when a number of outstanding comedians helped propel its growth. A few, like Jack Benny and Red Skelton, merely transferred over from radio. Others, such as Lucille Ball and Milton Berle, got their start in the movies. Then there was Jackie Gleason and Danny Thomas, Jerry Lewis and Martha Raye. All these performers found a new medium in TV for their talent. Re-runs keep their names alive even yet.

Perhaps you also remember Sid Caesar. With Imogene Coca they headlined "Your Show of Shows" on NBC. These two entertainers were highly successful and established themselves near the top of the chart in those days. In 1957, Caesar won an Emmy for his program "Caesar's World."

So it must have been particularly devastating just fifteen years later for Caesar to find himself in a dingy make-shift dressing room. He sat with his head in his hands, cast in a play far from the glittering television studios of New York and Hollywood. He had been the toast of the entertainment business, was wined and dined by sponsors, and knew all the other top-name stars. Now here he was in a drab backstage room in an old hotel in Saskatchewan, and he was lucky to find work even here.

Sid Caesar once appeared to be on top of the world, but alcohol and drugs and high living had pulled him down to the level of just another has-been. In fact, it was only the strength of his name, and the memory of those golden days, that got him jobs at all. Caesar established a high-water mark for comedy over many years, but now he seemed destined to destroy himself.

There in that old Canadian hotel, about as low as he could go, Sid Caesar decided to do something about the spiritual poverty that entrapped him. It began his climb out of despair. His autobiography, *Where Have I Been?*, details that long slide into oblivion and the change of direction that brought him back to become a better and stronger person.

This is a familiar story that has been played out thousands of times by other equally distressed and disillusioned people. They may not have been movie or sports stars, but still they had been solid folks who lost almost all they had and fell to the very pits of life. Their names are many and varied but, with slight variations, their stories are all the same. Perhaps you've known one of them along the way. Maybe you've even been one of their number.

The same time that Sid Caesar started to make it big, the Bishops of the Episcopal Church penned a pastoral letter. In it they cited materialism at home and abroad as the greatest enemy of Western civilization. They declared there was something wrong in post-WWII society, something deeply disturbing in the heart of seeming prosperity, that needed to be

identified for what it was and dealt with. Well, sometimes it's easier to name the problem than it is to correct it.

It's natural to equate worldly success with happiness. We learn a lesson early in life that the more you have the better off you'll be, and it's a hard one to shake. We want to believe it's true because it makes sense. It's logical and we can identify the path that will lead on to fame and fortune, at least enough of it to satisfy.

When people are generally convinced that this is the true way to salvation and happiness, we become a society that worships at the altar of material prosperity. The Gospel of Madison Avenue tells us that this is the way, and by our faith in the almighty dollar, we come to believe it. The fact that it's not true doesn't seem to dissuade people from following the accepted path.

Interestingly, this week's first reading carries a promise of prosperity, too, though applied in a different way. It says, "The Lord your God will make you abundantly prosperous in all your undertakings, in the fruit of your body, in the fruit of your livestock, and in the fruit of your soil. For the Lord will again take delight in prospering you, just as he delighted in prospering your ancestors...."

This came as especially good news to those who were in exile and far from home. It was something positive they could hang onto through bleak times. Note, though, there's a string attached to this promise and it is signaled by the word *when*. "The Lord your God will make you abundantly prosperous ... *when* you obey the Lord by observing his commandments and decrees." That makes it a different story.

Who isn't happy to hear that things are going to get better? We just apprehensive that it's conditional, that there's something we have to do in return. Yet, here's a promise, perhaps an unlikely one, that points to one of tangible prosperity. It seems so unGodlike, yet there it is seemingly clear and direct here in Deuteronomy. Listen again.

"The Lord your God will make you abundantly prosperous in all your undertakings ... when you obey the Lord by observing his commandments and by turning to God with all your heart and soul." The material side of life seems to receive the emphasis here at first glance, but its real intention is on spiritual prosperity. It emphasizes that the "things" of life are really secondary, though they are mentioned first in the promise.

But how can it be wrong to want a few nice things in life? Is it improper to want to have enough to send your children on to college? What's the harm in having a bit of security so that the ups and downs of life don't devastate us? Doesn't God, who understands everything, realize our material needs as well?

We tend to think we're so different from these earlier people we read about in Biblical times. After all, not even one of them had a smartphone so what could they know; yet, many of the things that concern us today, concerned them as well. The desire for a modicum of material security is one that we both hold in common.

Paul understood this human trait His letter to the Church at Colossae starts out with greetings and then a few words of thanksgiving. Paul says that he prays for them that "they may be

filled with the knowledge of God's will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding" and that they may lead lives that are pleasing to God and which bear fruit accordingly.

He doesn't directly address the issue of worldly prosperity in this letter. Nowhere does he correlate faithfulness with material gain. Yet Paul speaks to the broader concern raised here today by encouraging these early followers to endure everything with patience, even deprivation, because they have their reward in a spiritual inheritance. While he doesn't condemn houses or goods or jewelry, they do not indicate God's favor or reward. It is true, though, when one has their priorities straight, the rest of life often seems to fall in place.

What then does faith teach us about happiness? It tells us that it isn't always to be found where the world says it's located. Jesus advises, "What does it profit a person to gain the whole world, only to forfeit his life? Those who try to make their life secure through such acquisition will lose it. Yet those who willingly give up this kind of living will find true life."

The lesson then for us today is really a reminder, for we hear familiar words and even acknowledge their wisdom. It's easy to forget, however, as we get caught up in the busy pace of life. The mantra of "more is better" constantly challenges us in life around us and we're not immune to believing that.

Consider again the life of Sid Caesar. You can have everything, and really have nothing. You can appear to be sitting on the top of life, but really be at its bottom. You can surround yourself with all the worldly pleasures life has to offer, only to discover you're really in the throes of poverty.

The "things" of life aren't necessarily bad; they're just not the answer we ultimately seek. God's promise of sufficiency, once we have our lives set on the right path, is one we can rely on. When a person has discovered spiritual life as God intends, and lives correspondingly, everything else comes into perspective. We then live in a way that acknowledges life's intended priorities.

You see, prosperity can be found either in acquiring more, or in learning to live with less. The former will inevitably lead to disappointment, however, for one can never acquire enough to be totally satisfied. Conversely, you can be a person who struggles just to make ends meet and still feel fulfilled when you sit down at the end of the day. This person counts up all the things he or she has, and finds they have been really and truly blessed.

So, what will it take? How much is enough? When enough is all you need. Then you live by faith and trust that God will lead you right in the balance book of life.