

When We Get It Right

Luke 16:10-13

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Have you heard of the Terracotta Army? It's a collection of sculptures depicting the armies of Qin Shi Huang (CHIN SHE HWONG), the first emperor of China. He ruled at a time when various provinces were at war with each other. A great military leader, he conquered province after province and created one nation, launching the Qin dynasty, for which China probably was named. Qin Shi Huang had an expansive vision for his country. His public works projects included uniting diverse state walls into what later became the Great Wall of China and building a massive new national road system.

One of the emperor's greatest concerns was his own death. He searched for an elixir of immortality, a potion that would make him live forever. But he never found it. Realizing that he would in fact die one day, he used his wealth and power to build a city-sized mausoleum for himself. Craftsmen created a life-sized terracotta army to guard it. The purpose of the warriors, cavalry, soldiers, and horses was to protect the emperor in his afterlife. The army took years and years to build.

By the time Qin Shi Huang died in 210 B. C., his mausoleum was surrounded by more than 8,000 soldiers, along with chariots and horses (<http://science.nationalgeographic.com/science/archaeology/emperor-qin/>). When you see the pictures and diagrams of the terracotta warriors and horses, you can't help being amazed at how China's first emperor focused his resources on himself and his experience of the afterlife.

Two hundred years later and 4,000 miles away, a Jewish rabbi named Jesus of Nazareth began teaching people about another kingdom, called the kingdom of God. Like Qin Shi Huang, Jesus was bringing people together, but not in a nation of physical boundaries or a dynasty based on birthright. Jesus was welcoming people into a kingdom that would extend over every national boundary and unite people across time.

Rather than teaching people to amass fortune and power in this life or creating a false sense of security for the afterlife, Jesus taught his

followers to be generous with love, forgiveness, and kindness. He taught them to be careful about the unusual gravity of money, wealth, and possessions that would draw them away from God's kingdom. He told a story about a man who had an unusual harvest. The man, rather than sharing the harvest, decided to build a bigger barn to hold it so he could sit back and *eat, drink, and be merry!* So he built the bigger barn. Jesus finished the story in this way:

But God said to him, "You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?" This is how it will be with whoever stores up things for themselves but is not rich toward God. (Luke 12:20-21)

This is such an important saying, this call to be *rich toward God*. Both Qin Shi Huang and Jesus were teaching about the afterlife. One built the ultimate bigger barn, a palace mausoleum guarded by terracotta warriors he thought would support him in eternity but which were covered over with dirt and slowly broke apart; the other, Jesus, would have none of that. He told people to be rich toward God and specifically said,

Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moths and vermin destroy and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moths and vermin do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. (Matthew 6:19-21)

Why did Jesus teach us these things? Because he wanted the best for our lives. He wanted us to live knowing that we're already in the kingdom of heaven. "The kingdom of God" and "the kingdom of heaven" are phrases the Gospels use interchangeably. Jesus announces that the kingdom is at hand or is available. Many of his parables show that God's kingdom is present and accessible. Jesus also teaches that there's a future aspect of God's kingdom. We can say that God's kingdom is *already* and *not yet*. We begin to live under God's rule when we put our faith in Jesus and follow him. The kingdom is here and now whenever we do the will of God and align our lives with God's purposes. We also look forward to the final

realization of God's kingdom when God will rule the whole world with no hindrance or resistance. God's kingdom of love, justice, peace, and righteousness will be fully realized in the new heaven and new earth. We don't fear death, because we receive and experience Jesus' gift of salvation. In that relationship with God through Jesus in the Holy Spirit, we have eternal life; we're alive in God's kingdom now and forever.

Generosity is one part of our life in Christ. Living generously demonstrates our assurance of salvation, confidence that we'll spend eternity with God, and our sense of significance and goodness in the life we live here and now.

Jesus also teaches his followers to be generous because he wants us to bless others. Instead of piling up our resources for ourselves, he wants us to be a launch pad for other people.

What does it mean to be a launch pad? Take a look at this video: http://mychurchwebsite.s3.amazonaws.com/c269/4-blob_1.mp4. This took place at a camp called Summer's Best Two Weeks. The inflated raft-looking thing is the "blob." One person sits on the end of the blob, and it's not that much fun until a second person jumps off the top. When the second person lands in the blob, the first person is catapulted forward. Everyone enjoys launching and being launched.

Tony understood the concept, but he wasn't wild about heights. He was hesitant to jump. He's like a lot of people with generosity. He gets the concept but doesn't want to take the risk.

The other people are jumping and launching others. Soon they're getting launched themselves. Everyone is having a good time.

But Tony wasn't sure. Then finally, reluctantly, he took the risk. He launched someone else. Then he was able to get to a place where he was launched into the air. Did you see his face? His expression when he was soaring was much happier than when he was hesitating.

When you're generous with your church, you bless people. You launch others. That's what our church tries to do.

Our aim in our worship services is to glorify and honor God. At the same time, we want to experience God and get to know him for ourselves. In addition to offering three worship services and various classes on Sunday

mornings, we try to help people grow in Christ through Bible studies, small groups, service opportunities in mission, and youth outreach. Our Evangelism Committee is working to include more people as greeters and as Welcome Team members. We keep looking for more ways to reach and welcome new people.

We've started a Celebrate Recovery study with the aim of establishing the program here. Bible journaling classes are relatively new here. They provide opportunities for a lot of people to get to know the Bible in creative ways in fellowship with others. We've started a new Bible study class and I'm leading a new Sunday school class. We've continued our after-school program at Caddo and expanded the Wednesday evening youth program in Durant. Sunday night youth continues to draw kids from a wide area around Durant. We helped many children and youth go to church camp this summer—and provided leaders for several camps. Children's Ministry offers Wednesday night GPS, Easter egg hunt, summer VBS, Family Fall Fest, Children's Choir and Bells, and occasional Parents' Days Out. Music ministry, both traditional and contemporary, is an important part of the church's life.

Some of our giving and volunteer work supports ministry in our community. That includes Meals on Wheels, Families Feeding Families, Durant Ministerial Alliance, the Caddo Clothes Closet, and Blessing Boxes in Durant and Caddo. The youth are doing a canned food drive to help people during Thanksgiving. This year we again offered the Prom Closet ministry for dresses to go to those unable to purchase a prom dress. Through the United Methodist connection, our giving reaches across Oklahoma and the U.S. as well as around the world, reaching and helping people in the name of Jesus Christ. We donated more than 70 Hurricane Relief buckets after Hurricane Harvey.

In my Facebook feed this morning, "On this Day" had a picture from four years ago when we broke ground on this site. Now, look where we are four years later. Our building is becoming a center for the community and for local mission work. This summer we hosted mission teams from around the United States. And some of our youth and other members participated in the mission work here. The church hosted a United Prayer gathering in

the spring. We again hosted the Pregnancy Center's yearly banquet. And we hosted a Southeastern Oklahoma State University choir program in the spring.

According to demographic studies, the largest population in our community is age 18 to 34. There's an increase of new families and young singles in our area. A significant number of the children in our community are being taken care of by grandparents and this trend is on the rise. Several of us have worked with the Oklahoma United Methodist Conference in a pilot program called Discipleship Journey. The purpose of the program was to determine the demographics in our community and develop ideas about what our church could do to create a plan for reaching people in our area. We now need to form and implement specific plans for reaching people in both Durant and Caddo.

The people touched by our various ministries are the reason why Jesus calls us to be generous, blessing others. Jesus once told a somewhat confusing parable of a dishonest steward. At the end of the parable, he said,

Whoever can be trusted with very little can also be trusted with much, and whoever is dishonest with very little will also be dishonest with much. So if you have not been trustworthy in handling worldly wealth, who will entrust you with true riches? (Luke 16:10-11)

The list of ministries we've mentioned, the stories of people blessed, are the true riches of life. So often, all that people are going after is terracotta warriors. The reason we talk about generosity and about overcoming the human tendency to gather for ourselves when we should be sharing with others is that Jesus warned us about money, wealth, and possessions:

No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money. (Luke 16:13)

What do you celebrate about First United Methodist Church? How has the church's ministry impacted you and your family? Where are you involved in serving? What are your dreams for the future of the church?

Let's continue praying daily, "God bless this church and help us be all you want us to be." Let's *Know* God, *Grow* in Christ, and *Go* in the power of the Holy Spirit to witness and serve.

Generosity Challenge

We've been talking a lot about generosity over the past few weeks. Give prayerful thought to your own life and the generosity Jesus invites us to experience. As we sing, you're invited to bring your Estimate of Giving card and place it in the chest as an act of commitment. We're dedicating ourselves and our plans for generosity to God.