

Sermon by Bishop Richard C. Looney,

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For those of us who have two big left feet, isn't it wonderful to experience such grace and harmony in movement? I want you to know that the last 24 hours have been incredible to me personally. Yesterday morning, Danny reminded you of my claim to fame, the stature of five feet and 18 inches. And then, if that were not enough, I checked through the *Plain Dealer* yesterday to see what we've been up to and discovered my name in the headlines on the entertainment page. It says, Loopy and Looney. And I want you to know that "Looney" is in larger type than "Batman," "Superman," and "Daffy," and now I get to preach at General Conference.

The longer I live, the more excited I am about preaching because preaching is not talking. Preaching in those rare and wonderful moments becomes a channel for the living God. And I would hope this morning that you will not be checking up on what phrases I might use to help your caucus, but I hope you will be listening for some word from the living God because God still speaks through imperfect instruments. And what a blessing that would be in this moment to day.

The church has blessed me in far greater measure than I could ever have dreamed or hoped. And one of the special blessings has been to serve the last eight years as a part of the General Council on Finance and Administration. In the providence of God, directors and staff have come together who seem committed to serving the church and being good stewards of the church's resources. But I pray to day that each one of us may recognize anew that we are stewards of God's manifold grace, and that we are accountable for what we do with what we have received. But not only accountable, we are privileged to share with the world what we have received.

As you look at this marvelous text from First Peter, you see first of all that we are recipients of manifold grace. We are stewards who will be called to an account, and we are channels of the magnificent gifts and grace of God. When I was a young preacher, somebody said, "You better never read one of Clovis Chapel's sermons because you can't ever preach it any other way." It's so clear and logical and biblical. Well, I'm a little sorry that I bothered to read Father John's sermons on stewardship. Because they're so gripping and compelling that I can't get away from them. And you won't know for sure whether I'm talking or Father John is talking this morning.

We want to pause a moment to day and remember that we have received far more than we could ever deserve or dream of. God's blessings not only have to do with money, but they have to do with life and thought and affection and gift. We are, of all people, most blessed. Think about God's gift of material gifts: food and lodging and clothing. Think of God's special gifts of talent, not only beauty and rhythm, but

intelligence and personality, and strength and health. And then God gave us that most precious gift of an infinite spirit reflecting the wisdom and knowledge and memory of God. And God has entrusted to us affections such as love or hate, desire or aversion, fear or hope. And we are responsible for the way we nurture and use, or abuse, these gifts.

Wesley's strongest words were reserved for money. And he talked about how we are to gain. You remember that wonderful trilogy; "Gain all you can, save all you can, and give all you can." But Wesley made it clear, that as we seek to gain, we must never abuse these precious bodies that God has given us. Nor must we ever abuse the precious neighbor that God has placed around us. There is no place to use or misuse a human being for our gain. Wesley's emphasis led in great vitality to an emerging middle class in England.

But we have learned all too well, the second part of Wesley's trilogy: save all you can. And sometimes we think that's the end of life. But we fail to recognize that when Wesley talked about saving, he was not talking about bank accounts or investments. He was talking about the fact that we have no right to squander God's gifts, and we have no right to misuse God's gifts. He was really talking about a simple lifestyle. How much is enough? How much is too much?

We have become highly agitated in The United Methodist Church about reserves. And a part of our responsibility in GCFA, along with the agencies in GCOM, was to look at reserves. What is an acceptable level? What is an extravagant level? And that process has just begun. But I have not heard many people talking about personal reserves. We have been blessed by a booming economy. Even I have gotten interested in the stock market when I realized my pension was involved in the stock market. And I've become painfully aware that my own personal reserves must be expended in light of God's expectation. Because we have been given so much, we have a special responsibility to God and to one another.

Wesley used a startling analogy long before transplanted organs and reconnected hands. He said that "Suppose that you had hands and feet and eyes that could be shared with those in want, but instead you locked them up in a chest and amused your self with your collection. Would you not be an inhuman wretch? If, instead of seeking to win eternal salvation through your generosity, you just kept in your chest these gifts, you would be mad." Then he said, "If you hoard in your chest resources that would be re stored to God through the poor, you are an inhuman wretch. And if your desire for eternity revolves around your collection, you are mad."

Well, I confess to you that it's very easy to be come in human and to be mad in the accumulation of things for ourselves. Wesley said "Ask not about the tithe, ask not about even a third, ask not even about a half. But recognize that every thing you have and every thing you are is a gift from God, and for that you and I are accountable."

And it's not only a personal matter. Those of us who serve on agencies, those of us who live by expense accounts, can get used to a culture of extravagance. And we can assume that we deserve a gourmet meal, that we thrive on unnecessary trips, and that the church owes us some thing for our time and energy. We are stewards of all God's resources. How do you use your imagination? How do you use your voice? How do you use your affections for the will of God?

And, finally, this wonderful text reminds us that we're not only recipients, we're not only stewards, but we are channels. We are, of all people, most privileged to be able to funnel what has been given to us to others. If we are careless in our stewardship, we not only rob God, we not only rob the neighbor that God would bless through us, but we corrupt our own souls. Have you noticed that the more people make, the less they give? If people make \$10,000 or less, their percentage of giving is higher than if they make \$75,000 or more. That is pathetic. And we United Methodists rank nearly at the bottom of our giving, among the major religious groups in America. And we are not poor. We have allowed our desire for things and position and prestige to corrupt our very soul. And we are the loser, not the gainer. We are the loser.

May I share a rather personal example. My mom and dad lived for others. My dad was a Methodist preacher who always served minimum salary situations when he was not a conference evangelist. And our home was always filled with missionaries on leave, with evangelists. And there was a passion in their life and heart for others. In the '70s, my dad retired after 45 years of service, and Mom and Dad had set up what they called "The Looney Foundation." And for the next 20 years they raised more than a million dollars for missions. My dad buried dogs; he raised catnip; he raised exotic veg-

tales; he collected tin cans (their yard was an embarassment).

One of my fond memories, the first Christmas I went home after being elected a bishop, my father said to me: "Now boy, you may be the bishop in South Georgia, but when you come to this house you're my son, and you'll do as I tell you." And I said, "Yes, sir." And his order was that I get a plastic bag and go out into the ditches around Emory, Virginia, and pick up aluminum cans for missions. And you know, that was fun. I didn't feel very dignified; I didn't feel very pompous. But I collected cans for my father.

I came back to South Georgia and wrote a little article about that. And a small church with a part-time preacher picked up on that, and they collected enough aluminum cans to send \$1,600 to the Methodist Home for Children. I wonder what would happen if we could catch that kind of passion to use and multiply our gifts. As the writer to Ephesians said, "To thieves, straighten up so you can give to the needy." We need to restore what we have been given to God through the needy.

The story has a wonderful ending. My mom lived into her late 80s, my dad lived into his 90s. And I think a part of the reason they lived so long was that they had so much to live for. There was such excitement in their life to turn another dollar, to find an other can, to bury an other dog, that somebody might have medicine for leprosy, that someone might have a drug for disease. And I'm looking forward to retirement to discover what the church has done for me through their investments so I can continue to be a channel of blessing to others.

Would you sit up on your tip toes for a minute? Would you remember who you are? You are a recipient of the manifold grace of God! Are you thankful? Will you remember that you are accountable to God for every talent, every emotion, every affection, every dollar that you have? And will you say to God "Show me. Show me the joy of generosity." May God bless us. May God make us grateful. And may God use us for Christ's sake. Amen.