

Horizon 2035: Loving the World – 1 Timothy 6:17-19

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Oh, did you see that Amazon founder Jeff Bezos got married this week? Good for him. Glad to see something good finally happening for that guy.

The wedding took place in Venice—not Venice, California, or Venice, Florida, but Venice, Italy. I like to compare weddings I hear about to a wedding I attended here in town on May 31—my own wedding.

For example, the Bezos-Lauren Sanchez wedding in Venice was a multi-day affair, we read. The Nieman-Laura Hash wedding was three and half hours from the time of the bride's entry to the last dance.

Also, the main venue for the Bezos wedding in Venice was a vast, Renaissance-era brick building with frescoed walls in the heart of the city and surrounded by canals on 3 sides. The venue for the Nieman-Hash wedding was a delightful farm with a few cows looking on from the adjoining pasture. (Evidently, it was a nice enough place for Taylor Swift and her boyfriend to hang out at a week later.)

Organizers of the Bezos-Sanchez wedding rented 30 of Venice's water taxis for the event. Organizers of the Nieman-Hash wedding (Nieman and Hash) invited guests to just drive up and park in an open field.

Finally, Bezos' bride, Lauren Sanchez, is believed to have an engagement ring thought to be in the vicinity of 30 carats and valued between \$3 and \$5 million. Laura Nieman's engagement ring: Not 30 carats and not \$3-5 million in value.

I think the story of Jeff Bezos is an incredible story of success. The guy started, like so many successful entrepreneurs, with an idea in his basement and turned it into a business so big that he's now the third richest human in the world. He's earned every bit of his great wealth. And it is a massive amount of wealth.

Besides still owning 8.6 percent of Amazon (\$190 billion), Bezos is also the 23rd biggest landowner in America (420,000 acres), and owns 7 homes around the country (none of which are starter homes), a 417-foot yacht, two private jets and two helicopters. His other business interests include a space exploration company and ownership of the Washington Post.

That kind of wealth makes holding a luxurious, multi-day wedding in Venice what getting a cup of coffee from McDonalds would be for us. It's not going to crimp his style.

And yet, there's the opulence of such an event in Venice that makes regular people raise their eyebrows. To his credit, Bezos is making donations to local research and conservation organizations in Venice in the aftermath of the wedding there. But, among the well-to-do bride and groom and all the super-rich who were expected to attend the wedding, amid all the private jets that arrived for the wedding, and the seven yachts that were booked docking time in Venice, to the open-air amphitheater that was constructed, to the glitzy hotels guests stayed in, to the local high-end chefs that were commissioned to prepare the food, it just seems like so much.

And when there's that much wealth and extravagance in people's lives, we all know that priorities can shift. Not always. There are lots of very humble and generous wealthy people. But no matter how much wealth we have, money can change people.

And sometimes it becomes such a distraction that it causes us to block out the needs of the world around us.

The setting for the apostle Paul's first letter to Timothy is the city of Ephesus. During his fourth missionary journey, Paul had instructed his protégé Timothy to care for the church there. He wrote this letter when he realized that he himself would not be returning to Ephesus in the near future. And so he wanted to encourage Timothy to refute some false teachings in the church there in Ephesus and to supervise the affairs of the new emerging and growing church.

Evidently, over-the-top wealth was risking the church's mission. Because in chapter six of this letter, Paul directly urges Timothy to instruct those who were of great means to not let it stand in the way of what's most important: their hope in God.

"Command those who are rich in this present world," he said, "to not be arrogant nor to put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain, but to put their hope in God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment."

In other words, Paul wrote, beware of substitutes. Beware of those influences that might cloud one's vision of God or get in the way of one's relationship with God. The world's richest people need to hear that today, but so do middle class folks in East Tennessee. We're all susceptible to what the lure of money can do: keep us inward focused, rather than on the God we worship.

And then, Paul issues a second command to Timothy in these verses: "Command them to do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share."

For Paul, the message was clear: no matter your wealth, no matter your opulence or decadence, placing one's hope in God means sharing the blessings of our wealth.

Over the last few weeks, as we've focused on the many attributes of our congregation will continue doing so through next Sunday and on July 13, one quality that stands out as no less important than the others is that of demonstrating a love for the world around us—both near and far.

We are a church family that gives generously to the needs of others both locally and beyond our zip codes. Last year, among our budgeted and non-budgeted giving, over \$100,000 was given to support the needs of the world around us.

You're familiar with these good organizations we support with your gifts: Emerald Youth Foundation, Habitat for Humanity, the Morgan Scott Project, Bridge Refugee Services, the Volunteer Ministry Center, Shepherd of Hope Food Pantry, Knoxville Area Rescue Ministries, and Mobile Meals are just some of them. Your gifts to the church help sustain these important ministries in our community.

And today, this very day, you have a hands-on opportunity to live out Paul's command to be generous and share.

First, Sunset Gap is a ministry to the poor and underserved in Cocke County that has been a recipient of FPC's generosity for decades. Each December, you so generously support children that this ministry serves with Christmas gifts. You pick names off a list and buy for those kids. And this time of year, we ask you to provide backpacks and other school supplies as part of Sunset Gap's Back to School program. You can sign up on the bulletin board here today or sign up online.

Second, today following worship, you can participate in feeding the hungry by participating in a project to assemble meal kits for the needy. It begins at 10:00 in fellowship hall. There will be an assembly line you can be part of that, through simple and

easy tasks, people will be fed. The financial investment the Outreach Committee has made to this project, along with your love offerings you can choose to make, are making this effort possible.

You are using your hope in God to put your riches to work for the good of others. It's in our DNA and it's once again our opportunity. Even the evangelist Billy Graham said that "people hear the gospel better when their stomachs are full." We share the gospel and we love the world.

Last week, I received a call from our own Mindy Houlihan. Mindy works as a residential property manager here in town. And she called with a concern and a question.

She told me the story of a Hispanic family that lives in one of the properties she manages: a young mother, father, and their two children, plus the maternal grandmother to the two kids.

A couple weeks ago, the two young parents went to a wedding here in the area. The grandmother stayed home to tend to the children. On the way home from the wedding, the couple was pulled over by law enforcement for a traffic violation. Because both were undocumented, they were taken into custody.

The mom, a native of Venezuela, was detained and transported to Nashville. She immediately received a deportation order and has already been deported. The father, a native of Cuba, was detained in Nashville and was given the opportunity to apply for asylum. Doing so, however, would mean another 90-120 days in a detention facility — apart from his children. He chose to voluntarily deport back to Cuba, with the understanding that the children would reunite with him.

In an effort to make sure these children are reunited with at least one of their parents, Mindy asked if I knew of any agencies

that would be willing to fund bus tickets for the children and the grandmother, who will accompany them.

I wasn't aware of the appropriate agency to contact, but I assured Mindy she made the right call. We here at FPC would fund \$430 for the tickets.

First, that Mindy would be moved to help this family speaks to her kind and giving heart. Second, providing bus tickets to ensure a family can remain at least partially intact falls squarely within our mission to love the world.

Be generous and willing to share, Paul said. It's a hallmark of this church family we should all be proud of.