

Westminster Presbyterian Church
Des Moines, Iowa

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Isaiah 1:1, 10-20; Luke 12:32-40

“Jesus: The First Simplicity Guru”

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Often times this is just a financial stewardship kind of passage, because the first part talks about money and saving up your treasures for heaven, and they talk about physical financial treasures. But I don't want to go there that way today. I think Jesus meant something deeper and more complex than that, and I think that what he was talking about was really Holy Manna that is saved up in heaven. And that Holy Manna is also not just our physical or our financial manna, but also our emotional and spiritual manna that we are saving up, and there are ways that we do that.

It is trying to figure out how we live that life that God has prepared for us, so that with our material well-being and emotional well-being and our spiritual well-being, we are able to experience the true depth and joy of what it means to be a follower of Christ, and that entails finding our “True North.” Having in our compass (if any of you have ever used a compass you need to find the True North before you can find out where you are) – what I think Jesus is attempting to do in this passage, is help all of us find our True North – how we are to live our lives – what we are supposed to focus on and how we are going to live that life that brings glory to God, and brings meaning and joy to our lives.

Sometimes it is hard to explain what that True North is, but it is sometimes easier to explain what it isn't; so I'm going to begin by trying to explain, by explaining what *not* having a True North looks like. And, probably one of my greatest examples of that is Lance Armstrong.

When you think about him, there is no one in the early 2000s or the late 1990s all the way through 2012 [who hadn't heard of him]. If there was anybody that I would say that had the True North, I'd say it was Lance Armstrong. He had it all. He was amazing. He won the Tour de France more than once and if any of you have watched that grueling race day after day, you saw that he did it – and he won. Then, all of a sudden, the man gets cancer – and not just any form of cancer – he gets prostate cancer. Many people die from that. It was so inspiring how he got through his cancer. He went on not only to survive, but to win more Tour de France events. He was an inspiration to everyone. Not only was he a success on his bike but in his raising money, and he had one of if not the largest most successful nonprofits – Live Strong – that touched so many lives.

If anyone had a True North to endure bike racing, to get through cancer and to be at the top again and to care for so many people, how could he not have his True North set, knowing how to live morally, physically, ethically? Then all of a sudden – you all know the story – January of 2013 – like every celebrity who screws up – he sat down with Oprah Winfrey. He sits down with Oprah and he admits that he not only had been doping – taking steroids – but he had been helping others to do so. Not only that, but anyone who got in his way – including Greg LeMond who was this amazing bicyclist – he would fight and tear down and tear apart. He had done that, not only

to Greg LeMond, but to any other cyclist who had the gall or temerity to try and tell the truth about what was happening with bicycling or Lance Armstrong. This whole time, he admitted – for 20 years – he had been doping. That whole time, when it looked like he had his True North set, it was all just a mirage. He had been fooling all of us and himself. He admitted to Oprah that evening that he tried to do it all himself. He said, “I tried to control everything.” And, if that isn’t the first sign that your life is going to fall apart I don’t know what else would [be].

You know you have lost your way when you are trying to do it all yourself. That is what Jesus was attempting to say by talking about, “Don’t worry about the money, trust God to provide the Holy Manna that comes down from Heaven. Don’t attempt to be everything to everyone, be focused on how you can please God and bring meaning to your life.” When you attempt to control it, it will always fall apart.

Then I thought of another example. If Lance Armstrong was the epitome of losing your way, what is an example of somebody who didn’t lose their way – as far as we know. I wasn’t able to give this illustration before, because the guy was running for president. Thank goodness he isn’t running now because I get an illustration I can tell. That is Howard Schultz. Howard Schultz has an amazing story and I hadn’t heard about it until recently. Howard Schultz, as many of you know is a financier, a business person. He went on to run and be the CEO and organizer of Starbucks, the salvation for many of us before 10:00 am in the morning.

Howard Schultz grew up in Brooklyn, New York, and he lived in the projects. His mother and father had, I believe, seven children and life was right on the ragged edge. All of a sudden, one day, at the age of seven, in 1962, Howard was out there as a little boy rolling up snowballs and throwing them at his friends, and they are firing back, when Mom hollers out, “Get in the house Howard, your dad has had an accident.”

Howard runs in, sees his dad on the sofa, with his leg in a cast, couldn’t move for months – it was really shattered. All of a sudden, he [Howard] realizes that his life wasn’t very safe anymore. His father was a delivery man. He drove a day truck, and, of course, [now] he couldn’t drive. There weren’t the regulations that we have today and Howard Schultz’ dad was just fired.

He also lost his health benefits, so couldn’t go back to the doctor. They didn’t even have the money to cut the cast, they cut his own cast out at home. Howard was the one that the parents said had to answer the phone, because he had to come up with stories, so when the creditors and bill collectors called he would answer, and come up with a cockamamie story, and the bill collectors wouldn’t argue with a child.

That is what he remembered; that is the thing he focused on in life – his True North. All the way through, when he became an adolescent, he wanted to be a business person, so that when he had a business, he would have a business that his father would be proud to work for. He dreamed in his bed at night, as an adolescent, of what it would be like to own a business where everyone in the business – all of the employees – had their own health insurance so they wouldn’t have to go through what he went through. So their children wouldn’t have to be picking up the phone and giving the examples, and stories, and lies to the bill collectors.

How did he ever know that a few decades later he would own 21,000 stores worldwide? That he would have 191,000 employees who looked up to him and trusted him to protect their income, their livelihood and their insurance, so that they could have a better life than he did or his parents did in the projects, in Brooklyn, New York.

He had it tough. And, sometimes having it tough is a blessing, because it helps you realize and see what you don't want to be. He saw his True North by watching how painful his family's life was, and he set his goals – not focused on himself in what he could accomplish, not the success he could have – but he constantly looked and saw his employees, and saw the faces of his employees, and saw his own father and his own mother – his parents – and people struggling to get by in this life. He has made sure they were always getting a little bit more, at least, than minimum wage and that even part-time employees had their share of medical health, and got on plans, so that they would be able to get health care.

Now, I'm sure you can find someone who didn't have a good experience at Starbucks – whenever you have 191,000 people you will find a few that are not happy – but by and large the fact that business journals are celebrating this man for what he has attempted to do, shows that his heart has remained in the right place. After so many decades of trying so hard and everybody trying to find fault – the more successful you are, the more people are going to try and bring you down – they haven't quite found it with him. That shows to me that maybe, just maybe, his True North is real and lasting.

So, I share these two stories with you to remind us all of what our True North means. I think it means to live the moral, ethical lives that the Bible lays out – that Jesus was talking about in that passage – to focus more on others than yourself, to not be so bound to the almighty dollar to your own success – or you will fall into the same trap that Lance Armstrong did – but to live a life worthy of your family, and worthy of yourself, and worthy of Jesus, who you call your guiding light. When our True North is sound there is nothing we can't accomplish – just like a little boy in a project, in a slum of New York City, that nobody thought anything good could come from; and, yet, he turned out to be one of the greatest providers in our country – the greatest country in the world.

Anything can happen when our goals are high enough and we trust deeply enough. The way that you find your True North, and the way I find mine, is through prayer, so that we give the Holy Spirit the chance to speak to us. We do it in worshiping each Sunday, offering God our honor and glory by being here, and letting the Spirit move through us. We do it by reading our Bibles, so that we see how the Holy Spirit moved and guided people in their True North, so that they too could understand what it meant. When we read the Bible, it's not to memorize platitudes. It's to find out how God used other people, and if God used Moses, or God used David, or God used Jesus, or God used Paul, in certain ways, maybe God will work through us in a similar way when we find our True North. Don't shy away from your difficult moments. Embrace them, because there you will find God. There you find out what you really stand for and what you really believe and it will move you back to your True North.

When we do that we will experience joy, meaning and hope, and not fall apart like Lance Armstrong, but be fulfilled like Howard Schultz. Praise be in God's name. Amen.