The second reading was a letter written to a man named Timothy when he came as a new minister to his community. The letter begins with these words:

Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the command of God our Savior and of Christ Jesus our hope, to Timothy, my loyal child in the faith.

And then Paul, or perhaps some elder writing in Paul's name, goes on to instruct Timothy how to be a good leader, telling him to teach the faith, to tend to the flock, and to say his prayers. This is a letter from a seasoned and experienced apostle to a young pastor facing a heavy burden of responsibility in his new church.

The writer of the letter tells Timothy that the task that lies before him is a challenging one: false doctrine must be erased, public worship safeguarded, and effective leadership developed, and while he is doing all these things, Timothy must make sure that his own life is above reproach. The letter is a sort of priest's handbook, a leadership manual written by an experienced mentor, a crash course in How to Be A Rector 101.

The instruction begins 'As for you, man of God, shun all this.' The author is telling Timothy not to get trapped by the love of riches and a desire for luxury, and so he tells Timothy that 'the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil.' Note that it is not money but the love of money that is censured. Furthermore, he notes that some have wandered away from the faith in their eagerness to be rich. Shun that greediness and materialism, Timothy, he says, because you are a man of God and your focus is to be on the household of faith, not on fancy clothes and big boats.

St. John's Every Member Canvass is around the corner. This is stewardship time. We are trying to get some people to give more money and more people to give some money. This parish has a mission, and it needs your support. But the letter to Timothy isn't about church support; it declares much more than that. It warns us against setting our hopes on the uncertainty of riches, and tells us to set our hopes on God who provides everything for our enjoyment. The letter says that we are to be generous, and ready to share – not to support St. John's in our mission but “so that we may take hold of the life that really is life.” We will only know that we are rich, we will only feel that we are rich, if we know we have enough to share.

And we all are rich. A priest from Africa once visited us on Thanksgiving. It was Shem's first time outside of his country. He looked at the garage in our back yard and asked us who lived out there. “It's a garage,” I said, “for cars.” Shem's eyes grew large as he gasped, “Ohhhh, in America, even the cars have houses.” Make
no mistake, we are all rich. The only question is what we are going to do with our riches, for if we misuse them, says the letter, we will “pierce our hearts with many pains” and get into all kinds of trouble that will rob us of happiness and peace.

Next Paul instructs Timothy to fight the good fight of the faith, because there is an inevitable struggle when we try to live according to our faith. Paul saw that struggle in Ephesus, a port city with a brothel on the hillside and silversmiths selling idols in the streets. If you challenged idol worship there, if you condemned cult prostitution, you put people out of jobs, just like challenging the morality of gambling casinos in Connecticut or the ethics of waging war or the issues of gun control. Paul knew that Timothy had a hard task ahead of him, and so he gave him tools, the only tools that could help. “Pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance, gentleness,” he exhorted the young man, keep the commandments and trust in Christ Jesus. And then Paul goes right back to the dangers of being rich; he’s worried about how money can corrupt people. He’s not opposed to money; he just knows how dangerous it is. So he writes, “Command those who are rich not to set their hopes on their riches, but on God who richly provides everything for our enjoyment.”

Many years ago I was taught what those words mean, not by an experienced mentor, but by a man on his deathbed. He was a psychiatrist, the director of a large inpatient hospital, and I visited him during his last weeks of life. He wanted to tell me about what he had done and left undone, about his hopes and fears for his family, about his doubts and his faith, but his words got fewer and fewer as he lost his strength - until right before his end, when he summoned every bit of energy and passion he had to say what he thought was really important. I expected well-thought out advice, clear and succinct words of wisdom, but instead he said, “It’s all in a movie, all in a movie called City of Joy.” So I saw it. Indeed City of Joy is a moving film about a surgeon who has failed in his profession and failed in his life – and who finds strength and direction and love and joy in serving the poor in the slums of Calcutta.

Paul writes to Timothy to make sure that Timothy will always find this joy in (3:15) “the church of the living God.” And no less than that fledgling church of long ago, St. John’s, West Hartford, is also the household of God. And so Paul speaks to us here today, telling us not to dispute or argue, to care for each other, to use our wealth in helping each other, to say our prayers for everyone, and especially to pray for the rulers of our nation (2:1).
Oh, my goodness, don’t the rulers of our nation need our prayers more than ever before! It seems that everyone I know is throwing up their hands in despair over what’s going on in Washington. It doesn’t seem to matter which political party you’re talking about. Both sides are upset and mighty upset. They are feeling betrayed and angry and misunderstood. And so we have GOT to start talking to each other and we have GOT to start listening to each other.

The church, the faith community is perhaps the very best place we can do just that. We can lay a good foundation by working together in the Community Garden, by learning together at the Forums for Faith, by socializing at the Dine-Around. There is right and wrong on both sides of the political spectrum. We can only bridge it, we can only work together for good, if we listen to each other and respect each other rather than demonizing each other, and if we pray for each other – deliberately. Not like “my thoughts and prayers are with you,” but like setting aside a specific time every day to pray for our leaders, like watching the “other” television news channel, like listening with an open mind, like actually talking with each other.

I often read a little modern Bible translation called *The Message*. The translator, Eugene Peterson, has a way of telling the sacred story in the rhythm and speech of modern language so we hear the message afresh. Here is how Peterson renders the last sentences of today’s Epistle.

“Tell those rich in the world’s wealth to quit being so full of themselves and so obsessed with money, which is here today and gone tomorrow. Tell them to go after God, who piles on all the riches we can ever manage – to do good, to be rich in helping others, to be extravagantly generous. ... If they do that, they’ll build a treasury that will last, gaining life that is truly life.”

I heard about that treasury of joy this week. Like all weeks, it has been filled with stories. I heard a man in his 70s remember what happened when he was five and learned about the Ramabai Mukti mission in India, a place established to rescue and raise baby girls. Something about the stories of these orphans touched the boy’s heart so much that he emptied his piggy bank to help them. It was a decision that changed his life and still moves him. He has had a lot of memories from his seventy years, but he has never forgotten this one. He said that he never felt so good, so grown up, so in touch with God’s mission as he did then. I heard a woman who is climbing the corporate ladder say enough is enough. She is doing well, but her ethics are being compromised. She has decided to get off the ladder and start supporting the folks she has been competing with. Hers is a complex
story, and she isn’t sure what lies ahead, but she says she is at peace, that she somehow connected with God and doing something more than making money. She has gained life that is truly life. I heard the love story of a man tempted to have an affair. You know the story too – he and his wife have grown apart, she doesn’t understand him, and he has met someone who does. What is different in this story is that this man has decided to deal with his fragile marriage instead of breaking his marriage vows. Who knows how it will end, but at least it won’t be complicated by infidelity.

Today’s Epistle is simple, direct and filled with wise counsel for us all. The author even tells us to drink a little wine for our stomach’s sake. He also opines that “people caught up in a lot of talk can miss the whole point of faith.” People caught up in a lot of talk can miss the whole point of faith.

Maybe it is so. Amen.

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