

**FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
305 EAST MAIN STREET
DURHAM, NC 27701
PHONE: (919) 682-5511**



**“Building on a Firm Foundation:
2. Taking Hold of Life”
A sermon by Mark E. Diehl**

**All Saints’ Sunday/31st Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year A)
November 2, 2014
Psalm 107:1–9; 1 Timothy 6:6–19**

This morning we conclude our two-week series titled “Building on a Firm Foundation.” The text from 1 Timothy 6 provides our Stewardship theme as we consider our commitments for 2015, and it guides our reflections these two weeks in worship.

In addition, we observe All Saints’ Day today, a day of remembrance and gratitude for loved ones and friends and others who preceded us in the faith. All Saints’ Day commemorates those whose religious faith impacted for good the lives of others. Their choices for justice and righteousness and love were based in religious and moral commitments, and they made life better for the community, especially for the poor and the sick and the powerless.

As we engage this text from 1 Timothy, we weave together these disparate threads regarding stewardship and All Saints’ Day and enrich them with the thoughtful content of 1 Timothy.

Last week the scripture helped us focus on the active nature of faith with its use of verbs such as “pursue, fight, seize, keep, do.” And we saw how the history of this congregation, from its founding to our present day, reflects the active, engaged faith described by 1 Timothy.

This week the content of 1 Timothy is uncomfortable. It speaks directly to the rich and well-to-do. The original adherents of Christianity were found among the poor

and working classes, and that was likely the primary audience the message of 1 Timothy was directed toward.

The author writes, “If we have food and clothing, we will be content with these. But those who want to be rich fall into temptation and are trapped by many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, and in their eagerness to be rich, some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pains.... As for those who in the present age are rich, command them not to be haughty or to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but rather on God who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. They are to do good, to be rich in good works, generous, and ready to share, thus storing up for themselves the treasure of a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of the life that really is life.”

Many of us do not consider ourselves rich. Yet in the context of the people originally addressed, we would most certainly qualify as rich.

Whenever we please, we can command the playing of a symphony or order the production of a theatre performance at the touch of our hand. Only royalty had such privileges and power. Our cupboards and refrigerators are full. Are any among us food insecure?

And yet we live in a time when vast numbers of our fellow citizens do not have enough to eat or to keep their children fed. Many are homeless and unemployed. As Gene Nichol of the UNC Center on Poverty, Work, and Opportunity frequently says about America, “We are the richest, the poorest, and the most unequal developed nation in the world.” (New & Observer, Jan. 26, 2013)

According to 1 Timothy, there are temptations for both the rich and the poor. Eagerness for riches can lead the poor astray from finding the true center of life and its deep meaning. Those who are rich may confide in the comfort and security of such wealth, becoming arrogant and insensitive because they have forgotten and displaced the One who gives all that we have.

In many ways, it doesn't matter if you are rich or poor. We talk about what we *can do because we have* money or we talk about what we *would do if we had* money. Rich or poor, the talk is all the same: money, money, money.

1 Timothy suggests that alternative realities exist to these materialistic realities. And people of faith must seize these alternate realities. "Eternal life" and "true life" are the words used to describe these alternatives.

"Eternal life" is often associated with life after death. Yet in its deepest understanding, eternal life is human existence in the presence of God. Such an existence is available to us now, on this side of death. Eternal life, if understood properly, must never be a preoccupation with life beyond death; it must pervade the quality of life we live right now.

When Jesus was asked about resurrection, he turned the question around. "Have you not heard? God is the God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob. God is not the God of the dead but of the living, for all live in God."

When Jesus was asked by the Rich Young Ruler, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus responded by asking him about the commandments. The commandments are about life and relationship here. Jesus wanted to know if the desire for eternal life was centered in the present moment, a moment that involved obligations to family and neighbors. (Mark 10:17–27)

Jesus spoke of a kingdom, a realm that enters the present moment; it is not far away but very near. "The Kingdom of God is in your midst," Jesus preached.

The words "true life" or "the life that really is life" parallel the meaning of eternal life. In some ways this language is more approachable and understandable.

Real life, true life, is different from virtual existence. It is not fiction or fantasy. It is potent and unimaginably wild and defies prediction. It involves choice in the midst of chaos and beauty and relationships.

Recently I came across an advertisement that used the term “Real Life.” It was wonderful! It went like this:

Real life isn't perfect
But take a closer look
It's beautiful
For many reasons

It's filled with laughter
Love
Magic
Possibilities
Opportunities
And everything in between

Real life is a battle...
 worth fighting for
Real life is a journey...
 worth taking
Real life is an adventure...
 that can bring out the worst...
 and the best in you
Real life is not a fairy tale
 a movie
 or a TV show

Real life is a story...
 ... and you're the one writing it
You can turn struggles into success
Fears into peace of mind
And dreams into reality

For an organization trying to sell me something, that's not too shabby of an advertisement!

Real life, true life is most certainly punctuated with joy. For me, every moment I spend with my granddaughter is saturated with meaning and significance, whether we are singing songs or playing with toys on the floor or sitting on the front porch watching the world go by. Sometimes I catch the splendor of that moment in the moment, and it brings me wonder and awe, which are components of what we call worship.

At the same time, real life, true life, is not protected from disappointment or shielded from disaster. True life engages purpose and meaning even in the most challenging moments. True life extends beyond the boundaries of me and mine to embrace a world, a world of hurt and need, a world that also longs for peace and joy.

Taking hold of life that is truly life, that is real, always involves relationships. How we interact with family, with friends, with neighbors, with enemies, with the stranger and sojourner, with those who seemingly are not like us in any manner—this is what building on a firm foundation is all about. It is divine work, healing and reconciling work, justice work, peace work. That is the invitation being made by 1 Timothy to his community, and to ours.

In all my years of working with people, not one person has ever come to the end of his or her life and said, “I wish I had spent more time at the office.”

Take hold of life, life that is true life, life that really is life. We can’t do that by clenching our fists to grasp what is ours or to fight off others. We must open our hands in generosity and grace, in healing and shalom, in welcome and justice.

We walk with the saints throughout time when we do that: with Abraham and Sarah, with Moses and Miriam, with Mary and Martha and Peter and Paul, and with the contemporaries in our day and time who seek love and goodness. We take hold of life that really is life.