

Our nation's leaders gathered Thursday evening at the White House to rescue the nation from economic peril. I wasn't invited, so instead went to the Olive Garden in Avon to help Gene Carter celebrate his birthday. Then I came home and went for a walk around the block. **It was dark, and the stars were out.** I could see the Big Dipper and the North Star, Polaris, which is 430 light years away, which means I was seeing it as it was in 1578, long before the world had ever heard of sub-prime mortgages. The future astronomer, Galileo, was 14 years old. **Galileo would grow up to inform us the Earth was not the fixed center of the universe.** For that radical heresy, the Roman Catholic Church, which considered itself and the Earth the center of the universe, placed him under house arrest, where he spent the remainder of his life writing one of his finest books, Two New Sciences, which effectively launched the field of physics. But the light from the star Polaris predates all of that.

I am happy to report that 359 years later, on October 31, 1992, the Catholic church formally apologized to Galileo, who was not available for comment. **The church also conceded the Earth was not stationary, but moved in an orbit.** You can count on the church to do the right thing, three hundred and sixty years after everyone else.

I say this to introduce the matter of perspective, and to remind us what Galileo taught long ago, that the Earth is not the center of the universe, that the universe still spins merrily along, as it has for billions of years, that the challenges we face do not mean the world has ended. **A part of our world has changed, to be sure.** It remains to be seen whether that change will be bad or good.

If these challenges cause us to live more responsibly and sensibly, to live within our means, to stop borrowing against our children's future, then that lesson might well be worth these present difficulties. **If they cause us to trust less in our money and more in one another, then this upheaval might someday be seen as a blessing in disguise, as the silver lining of this economic cloud.** If these problems make us more gracious, more sympathetic, more quick to help our neighbor, then this time might well be viewed as the beginning of America's renewal.

Times like this not only cause us to put things in perspective, but to reconsider our priorities. **Last night, I conducted the funeral of a 46 year-old man who died from leukemia, leaving behind a family who would gleefully surrender their last dime to have their husband and daddy alive and well.** I can assure you they have not given any thought to America's economy. They stopped that luxury eighteen months ago, when someone they deeply loved began fighting for his life.

In the gospel of Luke is a story of a man whose barns were full, who was, as the hymn says, “rich in things and poor in soul.” **The abundance of his wealth stood in stark contrast to the poverty of his soul.** He sat back, reclined and dined, at the top of his game. But that night “his soul was required of him.” I used to think that meant he died. **Now I think he lived, but he lived in bondage to the very things he thought would set him free.**

When Joan and I married, we began setting aside money for our retirement. **Did that every paycheck.** Then the stock market took off. Do you remember that? Back in the olden days, when the Dow was around 14,000 points? **I’d get on the Internet, check our retirement account, and feel all warm and fuzzy inside.** Now we’re set, I told myself. But I didn’t feel set. I felt worried. Worried about the stock market going down. **After awhile, instead of feeling relaxed and secure, I felt anxious and insecure.** I was in bondage to the very thing I thought would make me free.

The problem with this economic news and breathless reporting is that after awhile we begin to believe money is the most important part of our lives. If our barns are full, life is good. If our barns are empty, life is bad. Everything hinges on what we own, what we possess. **We come to believe there is only way to measure our wealth and well-being.**

How do you measure your wealth? What do you think it means to be rich?

Do you have family? Friends? Are there people who love you?

Are you healthy? Can you walk? Or think? Do you have the capacity to imagine and reason?

What about your relationship with God? Does it provide you with hope and peace and comfort in difficult times? Does it make you a more loving, ethical person?

Can you appreciate art and music and all the other gifts which fill our world with beauty?

Can you enjoy the wonder of creation? Can you go outside and take pleasure in the flowers and the birds and the trees?

Do you have a meaningful job that helps people and creates useful goods and enriches the human experience?

Can you look across the table at your spouse and be moved to tears because every year you love them more?

Can you appreciate the sun on your face, and a bicycle ride in the country, the way it feels to pedal along and hear nothing but the birds and the whisper of tire on the tar?

Are you able to enjoy a meal with your friends, and conversation, and laughter, and delicious food?

Are you grateful for compassion and the milk of human kindness and people who ask how you're doing because they genuinely want to know?

Do you appreciate your pets and their non-judgmental affection?

At the end of the day is the world better because you're in it?

How do you measure your wealth? What do you think it means to be rich?

We are so much more than what we own. So Jesus told this parable to remind us that the poorest man in town might be the one whose barns are fullest, to remind us there are many ways to be rich in this world. Having money is only one of them, and perhaps in the end, the least satisfying.

Perspective. Like seeing those stars and remembering our troubles are but a flash in a system so vast and timeless as to defy definition.

This week, I urge you to begin understanding your wealth in a broader, more satisfying way. So when others shriek about how poor we've become, how close to ruin we are, you can smile to yourself and know otherwise.