

**D**id you know how many billionaires were there in the world as of March, 2008? 1,125, according to Forbes.com. Of these, more than 300 lost at least \$1 billion in 2008. Several dozen lost more than \$5 billion. The 10 richest lost more than \$150 billion. And America's biggest billionaire losers lost combined total of \$167 billion.

For regular people like us, these numbers make no difference at all. You can tell how painfully you would feel, if your \$20,000 dwindled down to mere \$200 in your checking. Once an individual's wealth reaches above \$1B, however, it is just a number. You cannot "feel" the difference of having the wealth of \$100B from \$1B. Do you think you can?

Interestingly, the owner of the second largest bank in Iceland lost all of his assets, and is now rated as 0. That is a rather steep drop from \$1.1B in March. I guess that person might be able to feel the difference of his newly found wealth of 0. Another poor

Spanish real estate investor is down from \$1.2B to the paltry sum of \$15M.

Then again, to the regular folks like us, \$15M is an unimaginable wealth, and I doubt any one of us would mind being made that poor at all—being worth measly \$15M. I bet the Spanish guy would feel differently about his poverty.

**A**s we see in these steep declines in the worth of different individuals' wealth, we must admit that in the modern days, wealth is not just the possession of actual assets, but also the perception of the wealth. By perception, I mean that the people around the world all agree that such and such person is worth so much so, and that person's wealth is rated at a certain value. The perceived wealth is not actual wealth, but as good, nonetheless.

Before the housing bubble burst, every home owner probably felt excited, watching the value of the house go up. The value of the

St. Andrew's UMC  
January 4<sup>th</sup>, 2009  
John 1:1, 10-18  
"Power To Become Children of God"

houses suffered a lot in past few years, but compared to the prices in the year 2001, probably, the current prices are still worth more now than then. It is the same house, slightly older and slightly remodeled, but its worth fluctuated so much in a relatively short intervening years, some property owners collectively became millionaires for a while, without having to lift a single finger. Even the real estate's worth—as opposed to the rising and falling prices of stocks—varies, and it, too, is a perceived value.

What I am saying is that a lot of what we believe to be the essence of our lives is not real, and a lot of what we value depends on the collective agreement and the shared perception. What I am saying is that what we see, what we touch, what we own—and what we depend on—are not so permanent things, but actually perishable things, just as the Bible says:

"You know that you were ransomed from the futile ways

inherited from your fathers, not with **perishable** things such as silver or gold,<sup>19</sup> but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot (I Pet. 1:18)."

The Apostle Paul also mentions what is imperishable in the context of material rewards:

"Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a **perishable** wreath, but we an **imperishable** (I Cor. 9:25)."

It may be a completely foreign concept to our ears to hear the biblical writers label the material possession or the precious metal as perishable. We tend to view the material wealth as having the permanence, as the foundation of security, and as the source of power to wield, and to control.

We must admit, however, that even the real estate and the precious metal can become perishable—although not at the same time—that is, lose their

St. Andrew's UMC  
January 4<sup>th</sup>, 2009  
John 1:1, 10-18  
"Power To Become Children of God"

values, depending on the market, and where you are situated. If you were lost in a desert, 50 lbs of gold would mean nothing.

Compared to these losses, the Biblical writers saw something that never loses its value, and testified to its worth. Even Jesus tried to teach such a thing to the crowd by telling the parable of a tenant farmer who found the treasure buried in the field, and that of the pearl merchant who discovered the pearl of great value.

Those who found something of great value will commit all they have in the world, in order to possess it. What in the world right now is so great in value that we are willing to commit all we have? If there is such a thing, we had better make sure that that thing is permanent in its value, and not subject to the change of the administrations, war, theft, deflations, or inflations.

**I** heard that the wife of the chief administrator of NASA, who was appointed by President Bush,

wrote to president-elect Obama not to fire him. I do not know if it is the sign of the hard times or the sweetness of the job position; no matter how fabulous that appointed position may be, everyone knows that it is anything but permanent.

Isn't it what everyone does, extending what is essentially temporary as long as possible, trying to preserve what is perishable as long as possible?

**T**he Gospel writer, John, is testifying to something that is permanent and imperishable. He may have come to us as the off-the-wall writer who had been influenced by the Gnostic thinking. He may have ditched the birth narrative of Jesus, and came up with a totally esoteric account of the origin of Jesus as the Word of God that became flesh, and dwelt among us. He may have confounded us by saying that the one who made known "God the Father" to us is "God the only begotten Son." He may have baffled us with the claim:

St. Andrew's UMC  
January 4<sup>th</sup>, 2009  
John 1:1, 10-18  
"Power To Become Children of God"

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.<sup>2</sup> The same was in the beginning with God.<sup>3</sup> All things were made by him; and without him was not any thing made that was made.

Isn't the Son supposed to come after the Father? But John says the Son was with the Father in the beginning. And the Son is as old as the Father. It makes no sense to the rational ears. Maybe John had the esoteric advantage to know what no one of us could have ever known. Maybe he had not. But he testified to us one thing that no one can nullify or deny:

<sup>12</sup> But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God;

**I** heard that one of the great mystery writers, Agatha Christie, gave the loyalty of her book as the birthday gift to her nieces and relatives. I guess she did not

realize how much her books were going to be worth after she passed away. That was a great birthday gift that set a person for life.

Only you had to be related to Agatha. If you weren't, you could only envy. What if you had received the recognition as one of Agatha's nieces? Wouldn't you have inherited a tidy sum that keeps giving? Wouldn't you have felt rather content, even if you lost your job and the house?

That *is* the force of John's testimony of the power to become children of God. When all else is lost, when there is no one who knows you, when you were excluded beyond any hope, you have been given one certain, imperishable inheritance. We have been given the power to become children of God through Jesus Christ.

**T**he worldly wealth is perishable, indeed, as the biblical writers testified. And as we have found out, wealth is not just the object

St. Andrew's UMC  
January 4<sup>th</sup>, 2009  
John 1:1, 10-18  
"Power To Become Children of God"

that we can touch and manipulate. Wealth is inherently tied to the mind's perception of its worth.

You see that every time a rummage sale is held. One person throws out the junk, while the other finds the treasure. The wealth is in the mind of the owner.

Now it would be okay, if one felt like disagreeing with the biblical writers' perspective on perishability of wealth. But nothing in the world gives us the permanence of the imperishable inheritance as the power to become the children of God.

**T**he human mind is fickle to the tiniest prospect of change, and it causes recession that causes the value of the assets to plummet in one day. What is visible and touchable is always in transit. The mind affected by what is visible and touchable will rise and fall with what is perishable. For the wealth is in the mind.

If our mind is convinced of the ownership of the wealth that is

imperishable and permanent, then we would not be shaken, no matter what happens to the perishable things. As the writer of I Peter says, we have the inheritance that is *imperishable*.

**L**ast November, I had a difficulty connecting with my mother. Her phone line was always busy. I suspected the phone line was faulty. I contacted the phone company and reported the problem. The phone company said the technician checked the line and there was no problem with the line. Even then, she would not pick up her phone. That did not make me feel good. So I drove to Oakland the next day, after worship.

I went up to her apartment, and pulled out the spare key that she gave me. The key did not fit. I remembered that she changed her lock. I cursed myself for not having asked for a spare key. I went down to the front desk and asked someone to open the door. There was a long wait and the patience-trying process, until the

St. Andrew's UMC  
January 4<sup>th</sup>, 2009  
John 1:1, 10-18  
"Power To Become Children of God"

person with the master key showed up. When the door was opened, I fully expected to see what I dreaded to see. But my mother was not in the apartment. So I wrote a note to her and left.

That evening, I unloaded an earful to a phone company supervisor. I told her if the service was not restored by next morning, my mother would switch the phone service to another company.

When I visited mother a few days later, I asked if she had a spare key. She told me she gave one to me, when she had the lock changed. The one I had was an old one.

Huh? I pulled out my key chain, and looked: there it was. I could not believe how I could have forgotten about it so completely, and had to go through the whole thing unnecessarily.

**W**e experience such trials, temptations, and disturbances, because we sometimes forget the promise, and forget what we

have and who we are: we have been given the power to become the children of God, and we are the children of God.

Other times, we just flat do not believe in the promise. As the ship in its berth rises and falls with the tide, if we do not have the spiritual foundation, we can only base our security on material things—and our mind trained in the material things is left high and dry, as our possessions and reputations fail us. If possessions and reputations make up the only foundation of life, when these are gone, so is the reason to go on.

In the New Year and onward, may you exercise this God-given power to become the children of God, and enjoy the gift of abundant life in Jesus' name.