

Words to live by?

A column by Mayor Dave Bartholomay for the Quad Community Press Newspaper (1/25/2011)

***“Work as hard as you can, to earn as much as you can,
to live on as little as you can, to give away as much as you can.”***

These words were adapted from the 1760 sermon ‘The Use of Money’ by John Wesley, founder of the Methodist Church. As I consider how I can help bridge the great divide that faces American politics and civic life today, I wonder if Wesley’s approach doesn’t offer a ray of hope for the future. Let’s take each piece apart:

“Work as hard as you can” – this is a bedrock belief of Midwestern folks. No argument here at any level.

“To earn as much as you can” – again, a tenet held by many, but not all, in America. Some will say this is the main goal of our economy, the freedom to earn as much as you can-- and, some would argue, to ‘keep’ as much as you can via a limited government. Others will claim that amassing as much money as you can isn’t really a goal at all and that the role of government is to require (through taxes) those successful at earning a lot of money to help support the safety net for those who struggle. The truth is that it doesn’t really matter how much money you earn or accumulate; it’s what you do with it that matters the most. So let’s move beyond these two perpetually conflicting views and focus on the next two parts of the statement.

“To live on as little as you can” – OK, now you can see the challenge we face in America today. Frugality and living on as little as we can is usually heard at church on Sunday and from elderly folks who lived through tough times. Most of us have been taught to work hard, remain humble, and not flaunt our success, although you’d be hard pressed to believe that as you watch professional football today! Clearly, whether one is rich or poor, there is value in saving and living on as little as you can. In fact, that’s often how the rich got rich! However, we all need to appreciate that ‘living on as little as you can’ will vary a great deal, because this is a free country and people can spend their earnings however they see fit. But don’t we all want to encourage a culture that spends wisely and saves for a rainy day?

“To give away as much as you can” – So you’ve worked hard, earned as much as you can, and lived as frugally as you can. Now the next challenge – to give away as much as you can! If this happened on a regular and significant basis, can you imagine how many fewer government programs we would need? Could school needs beyond minimal state support be funded by big donations through wills and regular donations and not just by property tax levies? Could domestic abuse programs, affordable housing, food shelves, and nursing home care be steadily and fully funded by the voluntary generosity of individuals, not government programs paid for by tax dollars? Imagine the sense of satisfaction and pride felt by people of all incomes who are good financial stewards moved to personally choose and significantly support the real unmet needs they see in the community.

We already see the impact of critical donations of time and money at work in our community, but can you imagine the growth we could see if each of us accepted the personal challenge needed to live by the words of John Wesley?