

## “The Millionaire”

Late last February, the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences awarded its Oscar for Best Picture to *Slumdog Millionaire*. Set in India, this truly delightful film begins with a multiple choice question, a multiple choice question that fills the screen. The question reads: Jamal Malik is one question away from winning 20,000,000 rupees. How did he do it? Is it: A. He cheated; B. He’s lucky; C. He’s a genius; or D. It is written?

*Slumdog Millionaire* then tells the story of young, uneducated Jamal Malik and the pregnant nexus between his life experiences and his phenomenal run on India’s version of the hit television show, *Who Wants to be a Millionaire?*

Having grown up in the slums of Mumbai, scavenging in dumps and working the streets, Jamal now ekes out a poverty plagued existence as a chai waller, a tea server. Finding himself torn from the long-sought love of his life and fearing for her safety, Jamal jumps at the opportunity to appear as a contestant on *Who Wants to be a Millionaire?*, not at all expecting to win any money, but desperately hoping that the publicity from his appearance on the most popular show in all of India will somehow lead to him finding and saving his beloved soul mate.

Once on the show, the uncanny and strangely pregnant nexus between Jamal’s life experiences and the particular questions he now faces begins to emerge. When Jamal does find and save his soul mate, when he does rightly answer and win the 20,000,000 rupees, when this extraordinary story of sacrifice and redemption, of deliverance and transformation, of renewal and re-creation comes to an end, the film returns to the multiple choice question asked at the beginning: Jamal Malik is one question away from winning 20,000,000 rupees. How did he do it? Answer: D. It is written.

It is written. We Presbyterians know all about that very same conviction, don’t we? In fact, we have our own word for it. That word is Providence.

When we Presbyterians speak of Providence we are talking about the invisible hand of God’s creating and governing power. An invisible hand that despite chronic faithlessness, despite habitual resistance, despite enduring opposition, nevertheless generously, graciously, and irrepressibly pushes us away from life-threatening chaos, and pulls us out of life-denying barrenness, ever and always guiding us and leading us toward the good and abundant life of God’s present and coming kingdom; an invisible hand of sacrifice and redemption, of deliverance and transformation, of renewal and re-creation.

Speaking of millionaires, does the name John Beresford Tipton ring any bells? Back in the 1950s, which is to say half a century ago—boy that’s something to think about right there, isn’t it?—half a century ago—back in the 1950s, there was a popular television show called *The Millionaire*. Every week on *The Millionaire*, a fictional John Beresford Tipton, an eccentric philanthropist to say the least, would give away anonymously a tax free cashier’s check in the amount of one million dollars made out to a randomly selected total stranger.

Actually, Tipton himself never delivered the check. In fact, Tipton never even appeared on camera. Viewers heard only his voice with an occasional glimpse of his hand as he passed the check to his unflappable associate Michael Anthony, who then delivered this extraordinary benevolence to an unsuspecting and soon to be astonished beneficiary.

For the next thirty minutes, viewers eagerly waited and watched to see where this life changing shift in circumstances would lead. I believe that a large part of the program’s popularity stemmed from its capacity to propel its viewers into their own realm of reverie where they envisioned what they themselves would do with a million dollars, and what their lives, and perhaps the lives of others, might then look like.

I also suspect that same capacity similarly accounts for part of the attraction to playing the lottery. It, too, kindles the imagination and inspires visions of what might be. I buy a lottery ticket maybe once or twice a year, only when there is some gigantic jackpot, and then only one ticket. Even though I know there is virtually no chance of me winning, I nevertheless spend the entire time between my purchase of that one ticket and the drawing that will almost certainly render it worthless, planning what I am going to do with the money, my imagination kindled and inspired by visions of what might be.

Both our Old Testament and New Testament readings this morning remind us that God calls us to faithfulness through imaginations kindled and inspired by visions of what might be. Both the prophet Isaiah and the seer John hold before us visions of a new heaven and a new earth, where the harvest is plentiful, where homes are secure, where life is long and healthy, where the wolf and the lamb feed together, where mourning and crying and pain are no more, where the leaves of the trees are for the healing of the nations, where God lives with us and among us, in us and through us; visions that fill us with hope, compel our allegiance, and catapult us into action, if we do indeed have eyes to see and ears to hear.

With that same hope, this morning I want to hold before you a vision, the vision of a millionaire, in fact a multi-millionaire. That millionaire is First Presbyterian Church.

Three weeks ago, in a sermon titled *Opening the Windows of Heaven*, I shared with you my conviction that the God of Jesus Christ continues to call us to tithe, that today God is calling all of us to give a full ten percent of our total household income to our local church in an unrestricted pledge for distribution and deployment according to the Spirit guided collective wisdom of the congregation and its leadership.

If our annual household income is \$50,000, then I believe God is calling us to give \$5000 and more each year to our local church, which in your case would be here to First Presbyterian. If your total household income is \$100,000, then \$10,000 here to First Church; if \$150,000 then \$15,000 and more.

I then urged all of you who are not already tithing to this church to take up a journey toward tithing, the same journey toward tithing adopted by me and my wife, a journey recently embraced by many of your sisters and brothers here at First Presbyterian; a journey toward tithing by increasing your pledge twenty percent or more this year and every year, until you are tithing to this church.

Based on readily available demographic information on median household income, if everyone here at First Presbyterian was tithing to this church those annual contributions would come to well over 2 million dollars, well over 2 million dollars and more, each year and every year. And that is the reason I want to hold before you the vision of First Presbyterian as a millionaire, because that, my friends, is who God has already enabled you to be, and intends you to be, and expects you to be.

As God would have it, faithful Christian stewardship is never about supporting the church budget. Instead, it is always about responding faithfully to God's claim on our resources for the sake of advancing God's present and coming kingdom. We are to think not of a budget that needs to be funded, but rather of a pool of resources that needs to be faithfully gathered and then faithfully deployed. As we have already seen, here at First Presbyterian that pool of resources is well over 2 million dollars, well over 2 million dollars to be faithfully gathered and faithfully deployed each year and every year so that God might be praised, and the body of Christ built up, and all families of the earth blessed.

Can you imagine the words and deeds that would go forth from this congregation with that kind of faithful stewardship, the witness to God's love in Jesus Christ you would be, the faith that would be formed, strengthened, and shared here?

Can you hear the songs that would be sung, the music that would be played, the joyful noise that would be lifted up?

Can you see the poor who would be helped, the children who would be nurtured, the alienated who would be brought near, the lonely who would be visited, the hungry who would be fed, the homeless who would be sheltered, the lives that would be saved, the God who would be glorified? Can you imagine, and hear, and see the promise and blessing of life lived out of a spirit of abundance rather than scarcity, of possibilities rather than limits, of hope rather than despair?

Surely these are visions that fill us with hope, that compel our allegiance, that catapult us into action.

There are seasons to the life of every congregation. Times when we gratefully look to the past in order to remember and honor who and what has gone before, the who and what that has laid the foundation for what is and is to come. There are other times when we faithfully focus on the present, making sometimes easy, sometimes hard, but nevertheless meaningful adjustments to who we are and where we are now. And then there are times when we eagerly turn toward the future in order to catch a vision of the congregation God is calling us to become, equipping us to become, and thus expecting us to become; a time for catching that vision and putting our feet in its path.

Now is such a time here at this church. Now is the time for you to turn eagerly toward the future. Already through your commitment to Appreciative Inquiry as well as other good and faithful modes of prayerful reflection, deliberation, and discernment, God has guided you toward that vision, that vision of who God is calling you to be, and equipping you to be, and thus expecting you to be. And taking up this journey toward becoming a tithing congregation is the only way to get there: year by year, increasing your pledge by twenty percent; step by step becoming the church God is calling you to be, equipping you to be, and thus expecting you to be.

Thursday we will celebrate Thanksgiving, a day of gratefully remembering the cornucopia of God's immeasurable generosity. Four weeks later we will celebrate Christmas, a day of remembering the gospel of God's amazing grace. Between those two celebrations, between Thanksgiving and Christmas, in the midst of God's generosity and grace, as a faithful response to God's generosity and grace, we are asking all of you to signal your commitment to our journey toward becoming a tithing church by turning in a pledge with an increase of twenty percent or more.

This journey toward tithing will be a life-giving, life-sustaining, life-saving pilgrimage of sacrifice and redemption, of deliverance and transformation, of renewal and re-creation. Sound like a pipe dream? Not at all. Because it is written. It is a journey and destination written by the prophet Isaiah, written by the seer John, written by the invisible hand of God's generous, gracious, and irrepressible providence. Amen.