

Generosity, The Heart's True Wealth

(Reflection by Rev. Peggy McDonagh, February 16, 2020)

The God of Love within me greets and acknowledges the God of Love within each of you.

My friends, we are in week three of the Wonder-Full Life series and once again, I express my appreciation to you for your willingness to embark on a spiritual journey that encourages us to raise our awareness about our money practices.

This series has been about illuminating the shadows that often shroud our relationship with money. It has been about curiosity, to be curious about our money practices, and to discover what true wealth means. It has been about creativity, engaging in some creative spiritual reflection about our relationship with money, and showing our personal images of the "rich" beauty around us. Finally, it has been about compassion and how we extend compassion to others through our money practices.

I hope that some of you have taken the time to engage honestly and gently in some reflections on your relationship with money, and in doing so have discovered new things about your money practices and how they reflect your values.

This week we examine the outer manifestations of our money practices and ask whether or not they align with our vision of generosity. In the movie "It's a Wonderful Life," George Bailey's father, Peter, who refuses to foreclose on the townspeople's mortgages when they fall on hard times, confronts the mean-spirited Mr. Potter.

(Voices heard but not seen)

Peter Bailey to Mr. Potter, "Mr. Potter, what makes you such a hard-skulled character? You have no family, no children. You can't begin to spend all the money you've got."

And George himself, after his father dies, reminds Mr. Potter that how we share with others is where true riches lie:

George Bailey to Mr. Potter, "Just remember this, Mr. Potter, that this rabble you've talking about...they do most of the working and paying and living and dying in this community. Well, is it too much to have them work and pay and live and die in a couple of decent rooms and a bath? Anyway, my father didn't think so. People were human beings to him, but to you, a

warped, frustrated old man, they're cattle. Well, in my book, my father died a much richer man than you'll ever be."

The difference between the Baileys and the Potters of the world can be seen in both their inner and their outer lives: The Potters align their outward money practices with their inner values, power, greed, and control. The Baileys align their money practices with their inner values of generosity, love, compassion, and looking out for the well-being of others.

This week's theme is "looking out," and it invites the use of the phrase "looking out for...." We might ask ourselves, "Who are we ultimately looking out for when we spend our resources?" The Potters look out for themselves; the Bailey's look out for others. When we look out into the world, do our actions reap bitterness and resentment or do they reap love and generosity?

Seven-year-old Mary was amazed and delighted to receive \$10 for her birthday from her stingy and scrooge-like uncle. Upon receiving the gift, she gave her uncle a big hug, and he asked her how she was going to spend it. Mary responded with a huge smile, "I'm taking it to Sunday School and giving it to God. God will be just as surprised as I was at getting more than the usual one dollar from you."

Already at the young age of seven, Mary's inner value of generosity is apparent. Via her money practice of giving to her church, Mary aligns her money with her soul.

In her book *The Soul of Money*, Lynne Twist writes, "Lining money up with our soul, with our deepest dreams and highest aspirations, is the source of our prosperity, rather than simply having more of it to work with. Each of us experiences a lifelong tug-of-war between our money interests and the calling of our soul" that encourages a "nagging conflicting relationship between money and our spiritual values."

When our relationship with money resides in the domain of soul, our actions are quite different. We are more thoughtful, and generosity becomes natural. The power of materialism and greed does not sway us. We recognize the things in life that are valuable, and another person's suffering moves us, and we become charitable.

Jesus' understanding of money was very similar to Twist's teachings about money.

What is most prominent in Jesus' teachings and parables is that they all focused on the importance of people caring for the well-being of others. Throughout this series, we have been learning that Jesus did not criticize people for being wealthy, but he did address the accumulation of wealth

that benefited only the wealthy rather than using wealth to build God's kingdom and helping those who needed it the most.

In the reading we heard from 1st Timothy Paul gives advice to the wealthier members of the community about their relationship with money. In the Roman Empire, "selling out" describes someone's actions when they do not align with what they say they value or with what they believe. At the time when the letter to Timothy was written, some members of the Jesus movement, it was suspected, acquired their material wealth by cooperating with the Roman authorities. In contributing to the Empire, they were supporting the systemic oppression of the poor. This did not sit well with Paul.

He wanted the Jesus movement to be a counter-cultural movement that opposed the oppressive economic system that benefited only the wealthy. The Jesus movement focused on an equitable distribution of resources that ensured the care of all those who did not have access to the same resources. Like Jesus, Paul was not critical about those who were wealthy, because wealthy members of the community were essential benefactors who supported the teachers and apostles to help spread the ideals of the Jesus movement.

Paul encouraged the benefactors not to hoard or place their trust in their finances, which are uncertain, but to use their financial position to do good. When one's money practices align with one's values and visions, then we can create a more just world. In Paul's day the sharing of resources was a kind of generosity that gave life to the movement, to the giver, and the receiver. So too is that true for our day--when we share our resources inside and outside of the church, we give life to the church, to the giver, and to the receiver.

Paul writes, tell people who are rich to do good, to be rich in good works such as financial support of a movement that looks out for the well-being of others. Be generous and ready to share, and in so doing, store up treasure that is a good foundation for the future. For the church then and now, it is vital to secure a financial base to sustain it into the future.

However, Paul also understood that generosity did not rely solely on one's ability to give money. Many people had no money or a place to call home. Nonetheless, everyone in the Jesus movement was required to practice generosity because generosity did not just mean the giving of material things. Being generous included using one's time and energy, one's faith and love, for the well-being of everyone within the community and outside the community. Giving our presence, our attention, our

kindness, and our strength to another being are the greatest gifts we can give.

“So, whether we are able to be monetary benefactors or whether our benevolence comes in time and effort, when we are “rich in awareness” of how our everyday practices affect others, we can be faithful stewards of generosity.” It is all about aligning our money practices with God’s vision and values.

When we align our money with our spiritual values, we understand that we are custodians, stewards, and administrators of our money, time, and talents. As Lynn Twist observed, when our money practices align with Jesus’ vision of a just world our actions are quite different. “We are more thoughtful, and generosity becomes natural. We are no longer absorbed in and obsessed with money and possessions. We are not swayed by the power of materialism and greed” and the kind of happiness that the monetary system convinces us that we could have if we buy it. “We recognize the things in life that are valuable, and we have the capacity to be moved by another person’s suffering, and we become charitable.”

When our money practices align with our soul, we can eliminate wasteful spending and live more simply. We help to raise the standards of the living conditions of humanity, support and sustain the communities that nurture and feed our spirits and acknowledge that there is enough in the world for everyone.

Jesus said, “If you give to others, you will receive a full amount (measure) in return.” In fact, there will be so much that even if you pack it down and press it together, you will have to use your toga as a bag to carry it around. When we let go of trying to get more for ourselves, it frees up oceans of energy to make a difference in the lives of others and the world with our time, energy and resources.

One of the Gnostic Gospels proclaims, “As the inner, so the outer.” “Using money as a direct expression of one’s deepest sense of self,” says Lynn Twist, “is a powerful, miraculous thing.” If our deepest sense of self is full of compassion and generosity, then we can look out and act for the well-being of others, of creation, and the world. Such action is liberating, all that divides merges, there is no poverty of spirit, greed and fear give way to communities of abundance, love creates harmony with each other and the Earth, and finally, we awaken to what it truly means to have true wealth and be rich towards God. Amen and amen.