

TREASURES OF THE HEART

(Reflection by Rev. Peggy McDonagh, February 9, 2020)

My good and faithful people, this morning we enter the second week of 'The Wonder-Full Life' series and we become a little more intentional and visionary about our money practices. This past week as I was preparing this second part of the series, I experienced an increase in my anxiety and I wondered why addressing the issue of money, that is such an integral and necessary part of our lives, brings about such unease. After all, don't we think about money and talk about money in some way every day? People discuss it, argue about it, struggle with it, and try to make their plans around it.

Recently I have been speaking with people who do not attend church about this series and what I discovered is that many people want to understand generosity better and to impact the world more positively with their money. They were intrigued by the series and wanted to learn more.

I recognize that while sometimes it is challenging to talk about money in worship I remind myself that we live an "incarnational faith" – the belief that, like Jesus, our faith is not just an idea, but it gets lived out in our actions in the world. For me this series enables us in a courageous, honest and compassionate way to reflect on how our money practices get lived out in our actions that impact the world in a way that makes for a truly "wonder-full life." Thank you for having the courage and open-mindedness to take this spiritual journey along with me.

I heard this story of a young couple who had been married for about a year and continually struggled financially, so they decided to do something about it and develop a strategy. One day they had a serious talk about their finances. After much analysis, the young woman said to her husband, "If we miss two payments on the refrigerator and one payment on the washing machine, we'll have enough money to make a down payment on a LG 65" 4k HDR LED Smart TV." This amusing story invites us to think about what

we understand “abundance” to mean, what we value and what matters most in life.

Last week I talked about how we are all surrounded by a hugely powerful, controlling and all-consuming money system that encompasses every economic, social, industrial, and cultural structure that makes up our complex society. I mentioned how every aspect of our lives, rich or poor, is affected and that this system pulls us in all directions. It dictates how we spend our money, encourages us to hoard and to feel deserving. It deems what is valuable, what to accumulate, what to fear, and it creates vast discrepancies between people who have, and people who have not.

The movie *It's a Wonderful Life* that this series is based on articulates well how this powerful money system controls us and can cause us to lose sight of what we value and what is important in life. This week we are invited to think about creating a “courageous vision” for ourselves so that we can gain greater awareness of how our money practices can impact the world positively and lovingly.

Carl Jung said, “Your vision will become clear only when you look inside your own heart . . . who looks outside, dreams: who looks inside, awakes.” If we shape our lives around what the money system convinces us is good and right and abundant, we will continue to be controlled by its greed and power. If we look inward and think about what we value and what abundance means for us, we can create greater balance in our lives and be more at peace with ourselves.

In our Western world abundance is defined as ownership of things, financial security, good education, high paying jobs, a closet full of clothes, grocery stores filled with food, and beautiful living spaces. This perception of abundance, at its core, is about money. Abundance equals money. We become preoccupied with money and spend it in particular ways so that our lives continue to be abundant as defined by the dominant economic system. This abundance, this type of wealth tends to shroud what true abundance is, so it is essential then to put money into perspective.

In an article entitled 'Some reflections on church finance,' Jackson Carroll suggests that "money is one of the important humanly created media through which God's kingdom of justice and love is given embodiment. Through money, relationships can be established; human needs met, values, and purposes realized. However, like other cultural expressions, money can be used to build up or to tear down, to serve or dominate, to liberate or oppress."

An article entitled 'Money and the Spiritual Life' reminds us that "objectively speaking, money is simply a neutral instrument, a temporary substitute for material possessions."

Money is neither good nor bad. Our problems originate in the value we assign to it, the power we give it, and the decisions we make concerning how we spend it. In his encounters with others regarding money, Jesus was not condemning money, nor was he condemning people for having money or not having money. Instead, he was enabling people to see the juxtaposition of "what the world says is valuable," and "what is really worth a lot."

Matthew 6:19-24 comes from the midst of the Sermon on the Mount through which Jesus teaches about what is the proper motivation behind religious practices. For Jesus our motivation or our "state of heart" behind our actions should align with God's will.

In his commentary on this passage, Matt Skinner says that Jesus taught that, "the true value of monetary wealth lies not in its power to accumulate possessions in pursuit of power and comfort." The true value of wealth is generosity, "and a generous heart has its sights set on God."

Jesus' words about money are tough because he saw what happens when people are loyal to money and lose sight of how that loyalty can corrupt and destroy other people's lives and humanity.

For Jesus, the "treasures on earth," our possessions and acquisitions are always corruptible, vulnerable, and temporary. They often become the "gods" we worship. Our hearts can be made to follow where our treasure goes, and the "treasures of earth" are exceedingly inviting and

powerfully able to draw us to them. The “treasures of heaven” are the riches that come from the outpouring of love, generosity, and kindness and are aligned with God’s will.

Our hearts expand when the “treasures of heaven” become part of our money practices, in other words when we invest our time, energy, and money in the outpouring of generosity, love, and kindness that promotes God's vision of righteousness. God’s vision is of deep caring for our own well-being and the well-being of others, creation, and the world. How are your money practices caring for others, the earth, and the world? I suspect we all know the good feeling when we portion off some of our money to help others, refugees, social service organizations, and the church. We feel that expansion of our heart and that practice of giving indicates something of what we value in life.

In the movie *It's a Wonderful Life*, George Bailey's understanding of what was important in life was clouded by his preoccupation with the “treasures of earth.” He lost sight of the treasures of the heart.

The angel Clarence enabled George to turn inward and examine his obsession with the “treasures of the earth.” A wake-up call helped George realize that what he thought was so important, a successful business, possessions, money, and financial security must not cloud what truly mattered, his love of helping others, his family and friends.

Turning inward and examining our money practices helps us to align our practices with our values and with God’s values. When our spirituality aligns with our understanding of what constitutes true abundance, our human relationships, health, pets, moments of care, the delight of laughter, spiritual well-being, our loved ones, our church, the beauty of creation, in other words the “treasures of the heart,” then our hearts expand and we experience a deep sense of personal peace and well-being.

Just for a few minutes, I invite you to go inward and reflect on a some questions.

-If you had only ten days left to live, how would you spend them?

- If you had just a few minutes to evacuate your home, what would you take with you?
- If you had one phone call to make before your life on Earth ended, who would you call and what would you say?
- When you think about your life today, what matters most to you?

I encourage you take home the “Take Home Page” for this week and allow for some inward spiritual engagement about your money practices. It’s good to have money, and security, and the things that money can buy, but it’s good too, to check in occasionally with yourself to make sure that you haven’t lost sight of the things that money can’t buy.

I close with the quote by the angel Clarence Odbody, “You’ve been given a great gift, George: a chance to see what the world would be like without you . . . Strange, isn't it? Each man's life touches so many other lives, and when he isn't around, he leaves an awful hole.” We all know so well that hole in our heart left by someone we loved and valued. Today let us recognize and celebrate what we value in life, the value of ourselves, of those we love, of all that truly matters and all that makes for a Wonder-full life. Amen.