

First Unitarian Church

September 23, 2018

Our reading this morning is from the Christian scriptures. Luke 21:1-4, a parable called “The Widow’s Offering.” It’s a short one, for a short service. Here we go:

21 And He looked up and saw the rich putting their gifts into the treasury,
2 and He saw also a certain poor widow putting in two mites.^[a] 3 So He said,
“Truly I say to you that this poor widow has put in more than all; 4 for all
these out of their abundance have put in offerings ^[b]for God, but she out of
her poverty put in all the livelihood that she had.”

The “He” in this reading is Jesus of course. The treasury is the temple treasury; money given to support the work of the church. Mites are coins. Jesus sees a poor widow, which in those days, was shorthand for someone *really* poor, someone in a really unfortunate circumstance. Someone the community was supposed to care for—in the gospels Jesus spends a lot of time trying to get everyone to care about people like her. In this story, he sees her putting coins into the treasury, and calls it the most radical generosity.

Traditionally, the obvious moral of this story is the accepted one. That if a person gives a large amount, but it is only a small fraction of their resources, that is not as generous as a person who gives a small amount comprising a large fraction of their resources.

And, as you can imagine this story has been used a lot over the years to encourage people to give until it hurts. That’s not the most inspiring message. I certainly wouldn’t be inspired by a sermon like that, and anyway, I don’t want anyone to give until it hurts.

I want us to give until it feels good.

So I was curious about how else this story is interpreted. I did a search for scholarly and lay commentary on it. One of the most touching reads I found was from the online journal for Burning Man.

That’s right, I’m going to quote the Burning Man journal. Diverse sources, friends. Many windows, one light.

The writer says the image of the widow giving away her few coins is interesting because something profound happens when we give from our poverty—when we give from what we don’t have. But, he clarifies, if we only think about generosity in terms of money, then we are doing it wrong. That’s a shallow approach to life.

When you put those two ideas together—that generosity has to do with more than money, and that something profound happens when we give from our scarcity—then, “something important snaps into place,” he says.ⁱ He explains:

...giving what you don’t have is a fraught and powerful psychological act. If you don’t have the bandwidth to pay attention, offering someone your undivided attention is a far more potent act than throwing money at them.

If you don’t have time, spending time on something is giving out of your poverty. If you are lonely, and don’t have friends, offering friendship to others is a heady moment. If you feel unlistened to, listening to others is a soulful and momentous gift.

When I read this, I remembered something that happened when I was a teenager. Something really subversive that my mother did. She went to the grocery store, and bought.... a bag of shrimp.

Why was that subversive, you ask? I’ll tell you. It was subversive because she did it with food stamps.

If you weren’t on food stamps in the 90’s, there are a couple of things you need to know in order to understand what I mean. First of all, there was no discreet debit card version of food stamps back then like there is today. It was paper bills like money, but a different color like *monopoly* money, and it said “Food Coupon” on it and a dollar value. When you used it, the people in line behind you could totally see it.

Second, then—as now—there was a terrible stereotype that mothers who used food stamps were taking advantage of hard-working taxpayers. That they were living it up. Actually, the three of us lived in a tiny, bare, basement apartment. We had just enough—thanks to the social safety net—but the social safety net came at a steep social cost.

It is not fun to be on public assistance. Even if you qualify and live frugally, even if you pass all the inspections the social workers do in your crummy Section 8 apartment to make sure you’re not living it up, even if you follow all the rules, people are pretty nasty about it. To you and to your kids.

So one day at the grocery store my mom had just *had it* and she bought some freaking shrimp. Eight dollars per pound. Way more expensive than what we usually ate. She wanted us to have something nice, she said. Something to remind us of our dignity.

Dignity was scarce. She gave out of her scarcity. And you know what? We all experienced more dignity for it. It was an extravagant gift.

Yesterday, our government announced that it will begin denying green cards to immigrants who use food stamps, subsidized housing, Medicaid, or other parts of

the social safety net. Even if they are here legally. Even if their children are US citizens.

Now some parents will have to choose between having food and healthcare for their children, and being deported. It does not matter if those parents work full time, or work two or three jobs. If they don't make a living wage and they need help, the government calls them a burden on our economy. They are working within an economy in which the richest 1 percent in the United States owns more wealth than the bottom ninety percent. ⁱⁱ But the *poor* are the "burden."

They make it sound like there's not enough to go around. Like the average American is in a struggle with low paid immigrants for scarce resources. That's because as long as we are fighting like dogs over scraps on the floor, we are unlikely to look up and notice that the wealthy have stolen all the food from the table, fridge, freezer, fields, and neighboring towns, too.

They make it sound like there's not enough, but that's a lie. It's a lie that is greedy, cold, and callous toward children. It will result in malnourishment, homelessness, and death.

This is our context right now. You know the rest of it. The environment. Racism. Sexual abuse. Babies separated from their parents at the border for months. No end in sight. Dangerously divisive political rhetoric- and I am not talking about just one party.

Now, I don't like to make assumptions. But I am going to guess a few things about us gathered here this morning. I'm going to guess that just about every person here wants to *do* something right now. But the scale of the need and possible responses is overwhelming.

I'm going to guess that you probably don't have enough money to build something like a community center all by yourself. That's how Mayor Tim Keller referred to First Unitarian when he was here several weeks ago. He said it is "like a community center," so many events important to the wider community happen here.

And you probably do not have room in your home to take in multiple homeless families and feed them for a week; or host a three week long, African-American led summer camp to nurture the leadership and self esteem of young children, mostly African-American children, although that is surely important and needed in this time of school to prison pipelines, and police shootings, and lack of representation, and all the systems that perpetuate those things. But First Unitarian has that space and gives it away.

I'm going to guess that you don't have enough food in your pantry to give a bag away to every person who might show up and say they are hungry... but First Unitarian does. Our food pantry is celebrating its 30th year. In three decades, it has given away nearly 60,000 bags of food. This week, we hit a new record—over 140 bags in one

day—but we did not turn anyone away. Based on this week’s news, it seems like more people will be coming soon. There is enough.

As a congregation, we are giving away some things that feel scarce right now. Not just space. Not just groceries. But abundance. Love. Hope. Community. Tolerance. Engagement, where there might otherwise just be apathy or numbness.

Everything we do, everything we build, is for that. This fundraising campaign we are launching today is for *that*. The money is not just money. It’s *mission*. A building is not for the building’s sake. There are no monuments here. Instead there is abundance, love, a spiritual home, and a giving-away place.

We are doing this together. You and I. And the person next to you. And the people behind me. And the volunteers who are visiting stewards! If you get a call from a visiting steward, asking to meet with you to talk with you about this place, this thing we are doing, will you say yes?

Will you say yes?

I want you to take care of yourself and your family first. And then, whether you’ve got one mite, or a mountain of mites, or whether time and prayer are all you have to give right now, give until it feels good. Be part of extravagant goodness and generosity and love.

Let us give until it feels good. For the church. And also, *as* a church.

When we do that, there is always enough.

ⁱ <https://journal.burningman.org/2017/12/philosophical-center/spirituality/the-parable-of-the-gift/>

ⁱⁱ <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/07/24/opinion/nicholas-kristof-idiots-guide-to-inequality-piketty-capital.html>