

Lection: Luke 12:16-23, 30-34

Every year on this Sunday, I make a little game with myself of telling you how sorry I am to be asking you for your money. I make it seem like it's the last thing on earth I would ever want to do. Other years, I have suggested to you that I truly regret appearing to twist your heart strings while consciously doing the same thing with your arm to get at your wallet for the cause of the church and the ministry we share.

I have also suggested in year's past, that our Stewardship Committee bullies me somehow into making a persuasive ask while at the same time apologizing to you for asking so that no body gets the idea that I enjoy talking about the dirty subject of money. Money is after all—if you take the bible quote completely out of context and remove it from any grounding in spiritual reality, the root of all evil and in the past I have treated it that way.

Well last year, someone I love and respect a whole lot called me on my little game and reminded me that Jesus spent more time talking about money and the way faith and wealth impact human health and happiness than any other subject. This friend gently suggested that I cut the baloney and get right to the chase and stop beating around a bush that does not exist. They also reminded me that I knew better, so here goes.

Please fill out your pledge card—if you forgot yours today or have not sent it in, there are some extras in the pew pockets. Pledging is the way we say that we belong and are committed. When I sign my pledge card, I am renewing the vows I first took on the day I joined a church the first time when I was teenager. That’s my signature and that’s the minimum that I hope every member and friend of this congregation will do today or in the next week or so.

When I write down an amount on that pledge card, it is an indication that I intend to support the work of Jesus in a way that will make a difference in my life. When I put down my sincere intentions for the coming year, I support the work of the treasurer and the Board of Trustees and all the other officers of the church who try to manage this place. Signing a pledge card is my way of saying I belong. The amount I put down is my way of making my commitment specific and measurable. It is how I do my part. You can disagree with that and we can talk about that some other time, but that’s just how my mom and dad explained it to me and I think they had it right. They never had much, but they always had enough, because they got that part of life right.

Like the congregation they supported, this wonderful place relies on the financial support of its members and friends and grows in its ability to help others because people increase the amount of their giving. I am here and the rest of the staff are here and this building is

here because enough of you care in your giving to make that possible. That is not a theoretical statement, that is not an idea that I fished up somewhere, that is just the way it is.

If you are a visitor here today, let me say that if you enjoy our music and the beauty of this building or the programs this church offers or admire any of the mission work we do in this community or around the world, it happens because of the commitment the members and friends of this congregation make in time and talent and treasure. We invite you to join us in all the things that make this place special, participating and getting involved while you are here, including doing the best you can to offer your support.

Let me tell you a few things I believe based on the teachings of Jesus beginning with the words Beverly shared with us this morning and illustrated, perhaps poorly by the three worst jokes people have shared with me over the years about money and giving.

First joke, one day a man, known in his community to be quite a scoundrel and somewhat a reprobate suddenly got religion and went to the local preacher seeking Baptism. In that community, Baptism was not practiced with the scant watered daintiness we use with babies in this meeting house, but rather outside and down by the riverside. With the congregation gathered on the shore, the preacher and the man waded out into the water. As they did so, the man took out his wallet and held it up over his head while the preacher baptized him.

Coming up out of the water, the preacher asked the man why he had kept his wallet out of the water and the man responded, “Preacher, religion’s one thing, business is something else.”

First comment. That’s not how Jesus said it and if you want to live like Jesus, don’t try to live your life with your integrity compromised by the presence of compartments because where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. (Luke 12:34). Or to say it another way, how you use what you have is where your heart is headed. Get your treasure headed in the correct direction and your heart will follow. Give to the people and causes in which you believe, give reflecting the love you would like to have in life. Give imagining the world you would like to leave for your children and grandchildren and you will find your life made fuller by your giving.

. Second joke. Once upon a time there was a man who lived his life attempting to defy the common wisdom that says that on this earthly journey, we can do many things both bad and good, but no matter what we do, we cannot take it with us. As he approached death, he hired an executor and turned over his wealth to this executor and instructed the executor to turn all of his assets into cash to be placed in his casket at the time of death and buried with him in much the same way as the Egyptian pharaoh’s filled their tombs with their wealth. At the funeral, the trusted executor came forward just as the casket was

being closed and placed a check for the full amount of the estate in the man's suit pocket. I told you it was a bad joke.

Second comment, the only money you will ever have is the money you manage to share. And every once in a while when I figure that out and act as if I believed it, I catch a glimpse of what I think Jesus really meant when he was talking about heaven. That story about the person who tore down his barn to build larger ones because of all of his wealth is not a sad story because of his abundance, but because he only thought about holding on to what he had instead of investing it in the future.

Third joke, and this is the worst of the bunch, because it verges on guilt and I try not to do guilt and the joke turns heaven into an address, which I think is bad theology, but anyway, the third joke: A woman died and went to heaven and on her first day, St. Peter took her on an escorted tour of the place she would spend eternity. As they walked, they passed the many mansions with their streets of gold, they went through the heavenly city and headed on out into the suburbs where the mansions became "McMansions" and they kept on walking until they passed through a more distant suburb of heaven where the mansions were clearly the boxy efforts of some angel named Levitt. Finally, the streets of gold were left behind and a dirt trail led St. Peter and the woman off into the woods down a path that ended at a little hovel of a hut roughly nailed together. The woman was shocked and

indignantly turned to St. Peter in protest. Before she could say a word, St. Peter held up his hand and said: “Sorry, this is all we could manage with what you sent us over the years.”

Third comment, the truth in that poor excuse for a joke is something about honesty and integrity in how we give and care about other people. We can get angry with people who ask us to give. We can fool ourselves about how we use our resources, but we can’t fool God or the truth.

Let me say a few more things. I believe in proportional giving. The only measure of a gift is that you feel good about what you are giving. Some people believe that the best way to give is to give 10% of their income to others. Some people give in other ways. There is no right way, but as one wise person said to me once, you need to give until you feel good about your giving and if you don’t feel good about your giving, you are probably not giving enough.

Last year this congregation had a very good year financially. We paid all of our bills and had enough left over to hold some in reserve so when an air conditioner goes “kaflewee” next August, we won’t have to pass the hat. Why? Because of your generosity and your presence and because we as a congregation gave to others—supporting the United Church of Christ through Our Church’s Wider Mission and thirty or so other caring groups around this community. And that is the miracle of giving—we gave and God took care of the bottom line.

I could go on and I invite your questions anytime or to have the opportunity to talk with you individually, but these are things I believe so deeply about giving that each week my beloved and I put a check in the offering plate. Writing that check and giving that money and the volunteer hours here and to the other good things we support like the Ebenezer school, the Bargain Box, Grace place, our Colleges and Seminaries, and things like Heifer project and Habitat for Humanity is what we do because Jesus is in our life and because we try to listen to what he said and live some of his love.

I freely confess that I don't do that perfectly—none of us can. But you know what? We don't have to---Jesus loves us anyway. Jesus invites us to love our neighbors and to do what we can whenever we can to let his light shine. Amen.