

“Looking With Gratitude”

A sermon by Pastor Steve Easterday-McPadden
for FUMC Grand Junction, Sunday, Nov. 21, 2021

This sermon can be listened to on the FUMCGJ
website: <https://www.fumcgj.org/sermons/>

Scripture Text:

Acts 4:32-35 [CEB]

OPENING

(*Charles Eisenstein quote re: the place of money in what he calls the “Age of Reunion”*)

“Money in ‘the Age of Reunion’ will be

- *an agent for the development of social, cultural, natural, and spiritual capital, and not their consumption.*
- *It will be a mechanism for the sharing of wealth and not its accumulation.*
- *It will be a means for the creation of beauty, not its diminishment.*
- *It will be a barrier to greed and not an incentive.*
- *It will encourage joyful creative work, and not necessitate ‘jobs.’*
- *It will reinforce the cyclical processes of nature, and not violate them.*
- *And it will accompany a shift in consciousness that...[is] beginning to [be] experience today [in some circles], a shift toward a connected self in love with the world.”* [As quoted by Kulyk and McGeachy in *Integrating Meaning and Money: Practices for a Heart-Centered Life* (Decatur, GA: Chicory Wealth Publishing), 148]

At first blush, it sounds naïve, utopian, idealistic, even UNrealistic to think that money could ever operate in that way in a society.

TO THE SCRIPTURES

But here’s another quote for you:

Re-reading of Acts 4:32-35 [CEB]

[Now,] the community of believers was one in heart and mind. None of them would say, “This is mine!” about any of their possessions – but held everything in common.

[SKIP for now: The apostles continued to bear powerful witness to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and an abundance of grace was at work among them all.]

There were no needy persons among them. Those who owned properties or houses would sell them, bring the proceeds from the sales, and place them in the care and under the authority of the apostles. Then it was distributed to anyone who was in need.
– Acts 4:32-35 [CEB]

And, of course, we tolerate that because it’s in the Bible. But, truth be told, that is just as utopian, idealistic, and UNrealistic as Eisenstein’s vision.

SERMON THOUGHTS

It’s hard to avoid it, but anyone paying attention knows we’re skirting around a “dirty word” here, one that isn’t uttered in polite company, “the ‘s’ word”: socialism.

And that makes some folks really, really edgy – especially in our part of the State. And I understand that. Because what is heralded by some as the economic and political remedy for all that ails us, i.e.,

socialism, has never really worked on a long-term basis anywhere where it has been applied. It's always resulted in downturn in prosperity.

And I think that the reason has to do with the verse I skipped over when I read that passage from Acts a moment ago:

The apostles continued to bear powerful witness to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and an abundance of grace was at work among them all.

– Acts 4:33 [CEB]

The center of that communal system of life in the early church was not economic and political. It was theological and relational. It was the risen Christ and a no-holds-barred commitment to Christian love and discipleship on the part of the community of believers that was at the center of life for them – at least at that point in the church's development.

It is important to state that this communal way of life was not widely known in the early Christian communities. In fact, we only see it here in Acts 4. We see in other parts of Acts and Paul's letters where Paul was passionate about the Gentile churches giving a generous offering for the relief of the poor in Jerusalem. But at least at some point in time and in some limited geography, this communal way of life where no one was in need seemed to flourish.

Now, I'm not advocating for an expansion of socialism in this country. Lord knows our own system has enough problems to be addressed without bringing in a whole host of others. But I AM advocating for being open to how the Spirit of God may want to work in

you and me and our church in a transforming kind of way – the way depicted in this passage from Acts.

That's what this whole series has been about. It's not been about the Church's needs and how we all need to give more to support it. It's been about allowing the Holy Spirit to help us re-imagine the meaning and place money has in our lives. It's been about how gratitude for the bountiful gifts of God in our lives finds expression in our generous use of all of the resources God gives us: money for sure, but also time, talent, energy, attention.

And the question the Scripture reading raises for us today as we bring our treatment of this critical aspect of discipleship to a close is not about socialism. It's about perspective and transformation:

“What kind of community might we become if the risen Christ and a no-holds-barred commitment to Christian love and discipleship were at the center of who we are?”

TO THE SCRIPTURES

I rather think we'd begin to reflect what Paul put in the form of imperatives for followers of Jesus:

Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.
– 1 Thess. 5:16-18 [NRSV]

Those are actions Paul is urging his community in Thessalonica to engage in, not characteristics they might wait in hope for. **Do** these things, and see what happens, Paul says.

“What kind of community might we become if the risen Christ and a no-holds-barred commitment to Christian love and discipleship were at the center of who we are?”

SERMON THOUGHTS

We’ve been talking the past several weeks about how we feel about money and material resources in light of themes in the movie *It’s a Wonderful Life*.

- ✓ We’ve raised issues of fear and how that relates to our relationship with money. And we asked how our experiences growing up in our families of origin shaped our attitudes toward money.
- ✓ We’ve talked about the relationship between generosity and wealth in terms of a circuit where the sharing of gifts by generous hearts – money, time, talent, skill, attention... – produce warmth and blessing we can’t even imagine.
- ✓ We’ve talked about Wesley and his three rules for the faithful stewardship of earthly goods merely on loan to us from God: earn all you can; save all you can; give all you can.
- ✓ And we’re wrapping up today by asking what could happen if *the risen Christ and a no-holds-barred commitment to Christian love and discipleship were at the center of who we are*.

It seems to me that a natural outcome would be that we’d be people of gratitude, able to sense the richness of God’s grace and gifts in the myriad small ways they show up in our lives. And we’d be particularly adept at passing that richness on to others in need.

George Bailey, the main character in the movie, *It’s a Wonderful Life*, experienced the melting of his stone cold heart that had grown frigid in the icy presence of the mean-spirited banker and community bully, Mr. Potter. And when the angel-in-training, Clarence Odbody – who desperately wanted to earn his wings by helping a human being in need – showed George how truly bitter cold the world could have been had he not been a part of it, the frozen lump that had been his heart began to glow, warming his life and the lives of everyone around him.

Showing the final scene of the movie where George becomes the focus of the love of his family, his friends, and the community which he has served in numerous ways since he was a young boy, is the only way to bring this series to a fitting end.

In it, the community has gotten word that George and his business are in dire financial straits, and they respond in ways that harken back to Acts 4. Let’s watch...

(*Yancey: Please play the scene. STOP it at 3:51, please.*)

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qfE1_8lYPP4

CONCLUSION

Bells and angel wings: the Christmas tree ornament / gift for the congregation made by Kim Riggle.

Diana Butler Bass' Prayer of Thanksgiving

God, there are days we do not feel grateful at all:

- Days when we are anxious or angry.
- Days when we feel alone.
- Days when we do not understand what is happening in the world or with our neighbors.
- Days when the news is bleak, confusing.

God, we struggle to *feel* grateful.

But this Thanksgiving, we *choose* gratitude.

- We *choose* to accept life as a gift from you, and as a gift from the unfolding work of all creation.
- We *choose* to be grateful for the earth from which our food comes; for the water that gives life; and for the air we all breathe.
- We *choose* to thank our ancestors, those who came before us, grateful for their stories and struggles, and we receive their wisdom as a continuing gift for today.
- We *choose* to see our families and friends with new eyes, appreciating and accepting them for who they are.
- We are thankful for our homes, whether humble or grand.
- We will be grateful for our neighbors, no matter how they voted, whatever our differences, or how much we feel hurt or misunderstood by them.
- We *choose* to see the whole planet as our shared commons, the stage of the future of humankind and creation.

God, this Thanksgiving, we do not *give* thanks. We *choose* it.

- We will make this choice of thanks with courageous hearts, knowing that it is humbling to say “thank you.”
- We choose to see your sacred generosity, aware that we live in an infinite circle of gratitude; that we all are guests at a hospitable table around which gifts are passed and received.
- We will not let anything opposed to love take over this table. Instead, we choose grace – free and unmerited love – the giftedness of life everywhere.

In this choosing, and in the making, we will pass gratitude on to the world.

Thus, with you, and with all those gathered at this table, we pledge to make thanks.

We ask you to strengthen us in this resolve,

- Here, now, and into the future.
- Around our family table.
- Around the table of our nation.
- Around the table of the earth.

We choose thanks.

Amen.

[Source: Diana Butler Bass' Prayer of Gratitude:
<https://gratefulness.org/blog/thanksgiving-prayer/>]