

On the Journey

Exploring themes for deepening wisdom

Community Unitarian Universalist Congregation
468 Rosedale Ave
White Plains, NY 10605
www.cucwp.org / 914-946-1660

2023 Apr



The Spirituality of Money

Chalice Lighting

(unison): We light this chalice to shine on our time together. In its light we celebrate the relationships and understanding we are creating in this place and time. May our sharing be deep.

(light chalice)

On Our Hearts

Silence

(3 minutes)

Readings 1

Carl Sandburg: Money is power, freedom, a cushion, the root of all evil, the sum of blessings.

Stephen Jenkinson: Sorting out the place of money in your life is the soul's work.

Matthew 6:21: For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

Ralph Waldo Emerson: Money often costs too much.

Ben Franklin: Who is wise? He that learns from everyone. Who is powerful? He that governs his passions. Who is rich? He that is content. Who is that? Nobody.

Paul Clitheroe: It's not what you earn, it's what you spend.

Share reflections on these readings.

Readings 2

Davis Fisher: Look at your attitude and behavior regarding money and ask your- self, “Are behavior and attitude in line with the values I attempt to live by?” Our frustrations around money are often due to our behavior being out of sync with our values. That's when we find that our money is in control of us instead of us being in control of our money.

Victoria Curtiss: Money is a paradox in our culture -- it enslaves, yet it also frees; it is intensely private, but it is also very public; it measures worth, yet it is no measure of real worth; it destroys yet also creates.

Psalm 49, adapted by Christine Robinson: I am surrounded by those who put their trust in possessions and money. I am not taken in. What is precious in life can't be had in the marketplace. What is important about us is not what we acquire, but what we do to add love, goodness, and beauty to the world. It's the size of our hearts, not the size of our houses,. It's our wisdom, not our fame.

Share reflections on these readings.

The Reflection

Rev. Christine Robinson and Alicia Hawkins¹

“Your money or your life,” says the outlaw in the old joke.

When there is no answer, he prods the rich man with his gun and yells, “Your money or your life! Are you deaf?”

“No!” cries the rich man. “I just can’t decide!”

The odd thing about money is that it *is* our lives in such deep ways. Our money represents the fruits of our labors, the years of our lives we have spent at work, the value others have placed on our efforts. If we have inherited money, that money represents a gift of the self of another person, their labor and creativity. Money is shorthand for time and talent, and our time and our talents are who we deeply are. Money plays an important part in the comforts we have in our lives and the security we enjoy about the future. We pursue happiness, in part, with money. For all that we intuit that the love of money can be the root of all evil, we want it. “I’ve been rich and I’ve been poor,” said Mae West, “and rich is better.”

Money is our life in a deep way, but it’s not our only life. Having money is better than not having money only if the acquisition of that money has not eclipsed other important values, like family, creativity, spiritual life, and friendships. Acquiring riches often separates a person from family and friends, if only because it takes time and focus. It’s easy to develop a suspicious attitude toward one’s neighbors when one has considerably more material wealth than they do. Sometimes the wealthy ask themselves, “Do they really love me, or do they just love my money?” Further, the acquisition of money has an addictive potential. The desire for money can overcome love, common sense, health, and all the other values that make life good. In the end, of course, money cannot buy us health, friendship, family, or even security, helpful as it can be in all of these areas.

Poverty is just as injurious to the whole of our life as addiction to wealth. Real poverty, like wealth, can separate one from one’s fellows. Poverty can keep people from being creative or furthering their educational or spiritual goals. It can thrust a person into a frantic and single-minded focus on earning

¹Adapted from Christine Robinson and Alicia Hawkins, *Heart to Heart*, p. 57.

money or using dubious means to earn money. Sometimes monastics of various faiths practice poverty as a spiritual discipline. However, this would better be called simplicity, since these persons, even if they own very little, usually have enough security as a group to keep the damages of true poverty at bay. Real poverty is rarely good for the spirit. Great wealth is dangerous to the spirit. Between poverty and wealth is a point of balance for every person -- that point of "just enough."

Wealth and Riches. In pursuit of a balanced attitude toward money, perhaps our goal in life should be to live richly rather than to be wealthy. Here's the distinction.

"Wealthy" is a social lifestyle of those who have the most in a society, whether that's the one woman in the village who has a goat and a few chickens or the multibillionaire of our society.

"Wealthy" is not measured in any way except by comparison with others. That's one reason the pursuit of wealth is addictive. It is a nebulous goal. The grass is always greener somewhere else, and one never can quite say, "I've achieved wealth and can now turn to other things."

"Rich" is a broader and deeper word than "wealthy." You can be rich with friends or enjoy something richly. A color is rich if it is deep and well pigmented. A rich dessert has a certain depth and complexity of taste that a Popsicle or donut just doesn't have. In music, a rich tone is one that has a full range of overtones just under the surface. Thoreau believed he was rich because he knew the trees and animals around his hut at Walden Pond.

Most of us will never be wealthy, but many of us could be rich. Being rich involves having enough money to meet our needs without worry and living a life that involves many values and pleasures.

Having enough is a two-sided prescription. It means both that one has income and that one's wants do not exceed that income. To become rich, either one finds a large source of income, or one contains one's desires and enjoys life as it is. Thoreau said, "A man is rich in proportion to the number of things which he can afford to let alone." Lao Tzu came to this by another route: "He who is contented is rich."

When our pleasures have depth, it is much easier to be content with fewer of them. Like the rich dessert that satisfies in just a few bites, deep pleasures keep on giving. Cultivating deep pleasures helps us keep our wants small enough that our income becomes "enough." One trip abroad with a dear friend can be enjoyed for years of anticipating and remembering. Money given to a grand project of some kind brings the quiet pleasures of generosity long after purchased baubles would have faded. Using our life's energy to provide for ourselves and our families is deeply satisfying. These are all good things.

Balancing Life and Money. There are basically three things we do with money: share it, save it, and spend it. It is good to be intentional about what these proportions will be and disciplined about carrying them out. The biblical tithe (10 percent) is a standard of sharing that many people adopt. We should be saving at least that much; in some periods of our life we should be saving more. If we cannot do these things, our spending is out of balance. We are encouraged in this society to spend as a cure for all that troubles us, but this is a false road. Overspending is an out-of-balance reaction to an out-of-balance life.

On the other side, if earning money has begun to take up so much of our life that our friends, family, and hobbies must be put aside; if we hate going to work; if work is making us ill or forcing us to go against our values; then we have to make some serious decisions. Money is an important part of life, but it is not the whole of it. When the whole is seriously suffering, it may be time to simplify our desires and make some changes so that the whole of our life can be in balance.

Your money or your life? Let's strive to keep both — in balance.

Exercises

Before the gathering, reflect on money by doing one or more of the following activities.

Checkbook Theology. Look through your checkbook register or credit card bills. If you had just arrived from Mars and were given these documents as representative of the values of an Earthling, what would you conclude about their owner? What does ze care about?

Planned Giving. If you were given ten thousand dollars with the instructions that you had to give it away (but not to your fam- ily), to whom would you give the money? Make a table listing the groups or persons you would give money to, what you would want the money to be used for, and the percentages or amounts of money dispersed to each group or person.

Journaling Suggestions. Think about the last few times you spent money on luxuries or "frills." What motivated that spending? How did you feel?

Think about the last few times you gave money away. Why did you do it? How did you feel?

What do you want to do that you can't do because you don't have enough money?

Describe what "living richly" might mean for you.

Describe how money is one or more of the following things in your life: power, freedom, a cushion, the root of all evil, the sum of blessings.

What did money represent in your family when you were growing up, and what were you taught about its use? What was the most important message your parents sent to you about money? What is your most significant memory about money?

Think about the percentage of your income you share, save, and spend. Are you satisfied with the balance between these uses? What other choices would you consider making?

Bring With You to Your Group

Bring a big handful of coins to the group meeting. Think about the feelings the topic of money brings up for you now and how it was viewed by your family when you were a child. Give some thought to what you are willing to share with the group.

FOR FURTHER EXPLORATION

The “myth of scarcity” is self-fulfilling: if we believe it and react by fearful, protective hoarding, we create scarcity. But the truth of abundance is that if we share, we are all abundantly provided for. How does Brueggemann speak to your relationship with money?

Walter Brueggemann: The Liturgy of Abundance and the Myth of Scarcity²

The majority of the world's resources pour into the United States. And as we Americans grow more and more wealthy, money is becoming a kind of narcotic for us. We hardly notice our own prosperity or the poverty of so many others. The great contradiction is that we have more and more money and less and less generosity – less and less public money for the needy, less charity for the neighbor.

Though many of us are well intentioned, we have invested our lives in consumerism. We have a love affair with “more” – and we will never have enough. Consumerism is not simply a marketing strategy. It has become a demonic spiritual force among us, and the theological question facing us is whether the gospel has the power to help us withstand it.

The Bible starts out with a liturgy of abundance. Genesis 1 is a song of praise for God's generosity. It tells how well the world is ordered. It keeps saying, “It is good, it is good, it is good, it is very good.” It declares that God blesses – that is, endows with vitality – the plants and the animals and the fish and the birds and humankind. And it pictures the creator as saying, “Be fruitful and multiply.” In an orgy of fruitfulness, everything in its kind is to multiply the overflowing goodness. And as you know, the creation ends in Sabbath. God is so overrun with fruitfulness that God says, “I've got to take a break from all this. I've got to get out of the office.”

Martin Niemöller, the German pastor who heroically opposed Adolf Hitler, was a young man when, as part of a delegation of leaders of the Evangelical Lutheran Church, he met with Hitler in 1933. Niemöller stood at the back of the room and looked and listened. He didn't say anything. When he went home, his wife asked him what he had learned that day. Niemöller replied, “I discovered that Herr Hitler is a terribly frightened man.”

Because Pharaoh, like Hitler after him, is afraid that there aren't enough good things to go around, he must try to have them all. Because he is fearful, he is ruthless. Pharaoh hires Joseph to manage the monopoly. When the crops fail and the peasants run out of food, they come to Joseph. And on behalf of Pharaoh, Joseph says, “What's your collateral?” They give up their land for food, and then, the next year, they give up their cattle. By the third year of the famine they have no collateral but themselves. And that's how the children of Israel become slaves – through an economic transaction.

When the children of Israel are in the wilderness, beyond the reach of Egypt, they still look back and think, “Should we really go? All the world's glory is in Egypt and with Pharaoh.” But when they finally turn around and look into the wilderness, where there are no monopolies, they see the glory of Yahweh.

In answer to the people's fears and complaints, something extraordinary happens. God's love comes trickling down in the form of bread. They say, “Manhew?” – Hebrew for “What is it?” – and the word “manna” is born. They had never before received bread as a free gift that they couldn't control, predict, plan for or own. The meaning of this strange narrative is that the gifts of life are indeed given by a generous God. It's a wonder, it's a miracle, it's an embarrassment, it's irrational, but God's abundance transcends the market economy.

² Adapted and abridged from Walter Brueggemann, *Christian Century*, 1999.

Three things happened to this bread in Exodus 16. First, everybody had enough. But because Israel had learned to believe in scarcity in Egypt, people started to hoard the bread. When they tried to bank it, to invest it, it turned sour and rotted, because you cannot store up God's generosity. Finally, Moses said, "You know what we ought to do? We ought to do what God did in Genesis 1. We ought to have a Sabbath." Sabbath means that there's enough bread, that we don't have to hustle every day of our lives. There's no record that Pharaoh ever took a day off. People who think their lives consist of struggling to get more and more can never slow down because they won't ever have enough.

We who are now the richest nation are today's main coveters. We never feel that we have enough; we have to have more and more, and this insatiable desire destroys us. Whether we are liberal or conservative, we must confess that the central problem of our lives is that we are torn apart by the conflict between our attraction to the good news of abundance and the power of our belief in scarcity -- a belief that makes us greedy, mean and unneighborly. We spend our lives trying to sort out that ambiguity.

The conflict between the narratives of abundance and of scarcity is the defining problem confronting us. Can we live according to an ethic whereby we are not driven, controlled, anxious, frantic or greedy? Can we be sufficiently at home and at peace to care about others as we have been cared for?

If you are like me, while you study spiritual writings, you keep looking over at the screen to see how the market is doing. If you are like me, you study spiritual wisdom on a good day, but you watch Nike ads every day. And the Nike story says that our beginnings are in our achievements, and that we must create ourselves. My wife and I have some young friends who have a four-year-old son. Recently the mother told us that she was about to make a crucial decision. She had to get her son into the right kindergarten because if she didn't, then he wouldn't get into the right prep school. And that would mean not being able to get into Davidson College. And if he didn't go to school there he wouldn't be connected to the bankers in Charlotte and be able to get the kind of job where he would make a lot of money. Our friends' story is a kind of a parable of our notion that we must position ourselves because we must achieve, and build our own lives.

According to the Nike story, whoever has the most shoes when he dies wins. We end up only with whatever we manage to get for ourselves. This story ends in despair. It gives us a present tense of anxiety, fear, greed and brutality. It produces child and spouse abuse, indifference to the poor, the buildup of armaments, divisions between people, and environmental racism. It tells us not to care about anyone but ourselves -- and it is the prevailing creed of American society

The real issue confronting us is whether abundance can be trusted in the face of the story of scarcity. What we know in the secret recesses of our hearts is that the story of scarcity is a tale of death. We must decide where our trust is placed. If we choose the story of death, we will lose the land -- to excessive chemical fertilizer, or by pumping out the water table for irrigation, perhaps. Or maybe we'll only lose it at night, as going out after dark becomes more and more dangerous.

Jesus said it succinctly. You cannot serve God and mammon. And then he says, "Don't be anxious, because everything you need will be given to you." But you must decide. Jesus talks a great deal about the kingdom of God -- and what he means by that is a public life reorganized toward neighborliness.

Everywhere Jesus went he broke the vicious cycles of poverty, bondage, fear and death; he healed, transformed, empowered and brought new life. Jesus' example gives us the mandate to transform our public life.

The ideology devoted to encouraging consumption wants to shrivel our imaginations so that we cannot conceive of living in any way that would be less profitable for the dominant corporate structures. But Jesus tells us that we can change the world.

The feeding of the multitudes, recorded in Mark's Gospel, is an example of the new world coming into being through God. When the disciples, charged with feeding the hungry crowd, found a child with five loaves and two fishes, Jesus took, blessed, broke and gave the bread. These are the four decisive verbs of our sacramental existence. Jesus conducted a Eucharist, a gratitude. He demonstrated that the world is filled with abundance and freighted with generosity. If bread is broken and shared, there is enough for all. Jesus is engaged in the sacramental, subversive reordering of public reality.

The market ideology wants us to believe that the world is profane -- life consists of buying and selling, weighing, measuring and trading, and then finally sinking down into death and nothingness. But Jesus presents an entirely different kind of economy, one infused with the mystery of abundance and a cruciform kind of generosity. Five thousand are fed and 12 baskets of food are left over -- one for every tribe of Israel. Jesus transforms the economy by blessing it and breaking it beyond self-interest.

It is, of course, easier to talk about these things than to live them. Many people both inside and outside of the church haven't a clue that Jesus is talking about the economy. We haven't taught them that he is. But we must begin to do so now, no matter how economically compromised we may feel. Our world absolutely requires this news. It has nothing to do with being Republicans or Democrats, liberals or conservatives, socialists or capitalists. It is much more elemental: creation is infused with generosity, and we can find practices, procedures and institutions that allow that generosity to work.

We have many possessions. Sharing our abundance may require the faith to trust in creation's inherent generosity, so that bread may abound.



Closing

Facilitator: Closing words from Joe Dominguez and Vicki Robin: Respect the life energy you are putting into your job. Money is simply something you trade your life energy for. Trade it with purpose and integrity for increased earnings. Ask yourself: Am I making a living or making a dying?
(extinguish chalice)

All (unison): Thank you for your loving hands, your loving heart, your loving ways. Thank you for the gifts you bring into the world each day. And if you ever doubt yourself, remember us, who love you well. We know all the gifts you bring into the world each day. So thank you for your loving hands, your loving heart, your loving ways. Thank you for the gifts you bring into the world each day.



On the Journey is produced by Community Unitarian Universalist Congregation at White Plains, NY for use in small groups. Each month (ten months a year) explores a different theological or spiritual theme.

Editor: Meredith Garmon. Email: OnTheJourneyGroup@gmail.com

Next issue, 2023 May: Happiness