“A Treasure in Clay Pots”

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First Congregational United Church of Christ, Gaylord, Michigan

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Text: 2 Corinthians 4: 5-12

It was some 30 years ago that I directed a musical at the church I served. It was called, “Peace in the Kingdom.” I’m relying on my memory, but one of the songs in that musical was simply called “More.” The words went something like this:

More, more, more!
It’s all that we adore,
What we cannot ignore,
Is more!
The more we have, the more we desire.
How much more can we acquire?
Where’s the sale?
Here’s the buyer!
More, more, more…

That is not all of the song, but you get the idea. It was all about consumption. You know, back in the day, we had a problem with consumption. We were always pressured to buy more. Some even called it “conspicuous consumption.” Ads on TV for every product you could imagine. Do you remember some of the commercial jingles? Many of us of a certain age remember the phrase, “Where’s the Beef?” Do you have others? It’s not like today where everyone leaves us alone. No one is pressuring us to buy anything. No one sends us messages the way they used to. It’s so quiet! Yeah, right. In fact, you might say it has gotten worse.

We all need to buy things. For the most part, that's the way we get what we need. We need money. And, we have to sell things to get money. Some of us sell our time and get paid for what we do. Others sell items, or experiences, or whatever. Some of us provide a service and get paid for that. It all requires money. No surprise. At the same time, I think you'll agree that sometimes we acquire too much. Our economy kind of requires it. We know that consumer spending is the main driver of our economy. No wonder there is so much pressure.

Recently, in a meeting with our financial advisor (who is a dear person and I'm not trying to put her down), and she said to us that we need to think about how much money we give away. From a purely financial perspective, it could be considered excessive. At the same time, what we do with our money reflects our values. That's true for us as individuals, couples, families, churches, businesses, governments…you name it! And in our house, we value the causes we support financially. In fact, I wish we could do more! That does mean we don't have as much for other things, but the basics are covered, and we will be okay.

I'm not at all suggesting that anyone should take on debt or give "till it hurts." That is not helpful at all. Giving shouldn't be painful or deprive anyone of the basic things they need to survive and thrive. And yet, our economy and the principles upon which it is founded push us toward hoarding, purchasing, and short-term gratification. Thankfully, our financial advisor's concern was about retirement. Not whether we can or not, but how we want to retire and when.

Our commentator for this morning, Rev. Dr. Elena Larssen, tells the story of a member of her congregation giving a stewardship testimonial. In that testimonial, the church member told her own story. It went like this:

> You know I'm a businessperson, so I can't explain this, but it happened to me, and I believe it can happen to you: the more I gave, the more I had. See, I had gotten to a place where I knew it was really important for me to give more, but I wasn't sure I could make it happen. So, I stepped out in faith. I don't know how it works, because this is not how business works, but giving more meant I had more. Money! Actual money! There is something I can't explain about generosity, but everything worked out, and better than I knew it could. I think you should try it.

Rev. Dr. Larssen goes on to explain that the woman "never said that giving cause God to bless her; she never said that more income was a reward for her faith. But what she did witness was that the more she gave, the more she had. Giving and receiving had become freely interactive, in a new way. Something about giving shifted her relationship with money such that her old relationship with money was transformed. She no longer saw her giving as a matter of 'paying her share' and instead made a choice to alight with God's economy of love. She experienced the connection of the material and spiritual in the act of giving—and was transformed with God's surpassing power.

In the end, the point today is that we only have so much money, and we are constantly faced with choices about how to use that money. For some of us, basics are all we can do, and we can't afford to give anything away. For many of us, it has to do with what we define as basics and about the choices we make with money that we may have beyond our basics. I'm not here to tell you how you should give, or to make you feel guilty. I'm sorry if that is how you end up feeling, because that is not the point.

Instead, the point is "subversive stewardship." Rev. Larssen defines it this way: Stewardship traditionally means tending well the gifts that God has given. Perhaps today's givers can go a step further and give in ways that creates an economy of love, trust, and generosity. Subversive Stewardship means using your gifts to create the world that God calls us to build and experiencing transformation in the process.

You've heard about God, right? God is the one who always turns things on their head. The economies of this world are about consumption…and having more. They are also about dominance – power over—and looking good. The economies of this world are often based on the superficial and the transactional. God's economy—God's everything—work differently.

Going back to the musical that I directed years ago, the foundational scripture is one that you have heard before. It comes from Isaiah 11: 6-9:

The wolf shall live with the lamb;
the leopard shall lie down with the kid;
the calf and the lion will feed[b] together,
and a little child shall lead them.
7 The cow and the bear shall graze;
their young shall lie down together;
and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.
8 The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp,
and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den.
9 They will not hurt or destroy
on all my holy mountain,
for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord
as the waters cover the sea.

In the musical, the words were something like this:

There will come a day when the world shall have peace.

And there'll come an hour for the captives' release.

And we shall have peace…peace in the kingdom.

The ultimate question of stewardship is what will we do with our time, talent, and resources to make a more peaceful world? And it might just be that the way we do things will be different from the way the world tells us to live. "Stewardship is a way to see our giving as building God's world…. Every system is a choice. Those who give in Christian love can participate in creating God's economy of love and responsibility to one another. In this way, the gifts to grace that are given in our lives are like the blessing of the clay jars: the power of our giving belongs to God, and we are transformed by join in making God's world a better place for all."

In the many blessed names of God. Amen.