

“Reciprocity and Relationship”

Rev. Greg Watling

First Congregational United Church of Christ, Gaylord, Michigan

Sunday, November 16, 2025

Texts: Psalm 115 and Luke 12: 22-34

In the opening sentence of her last chapter of the book *The Serviceberry*:

Abundance and Reciprocity in the Natural World, Robin Wall Kimmerer states, “The threat of real scarcity on the horizon is brought to us by unbridled capitalism.” I know there are people, perhaps those among us, who struggle with criticism of capitalism. Jesus’ preferential option for the widowed and the poor can be a struggle as well. But perhaps you’ll hear this morning a broader view of what Jesus (and later Wall Kimmerer) are speaking about. We live in such a dualistic world that we often think that criticism of something means we want to reject that thing completely. More often, criticism is meant to improve whatever we’re speaking about, in this case our economic model. Both Jesus and Robin Wall Kimmerer have criticisms of the way we use money, materials, and the earth that provides everything. They also have deep concerns about how we treat one another as people. I think you’ll agree that many people in our world could use a refresher course on how we treat people. Maybe you and I need such a refresher course? In the end, the recommendation is to approach our economic decisions with more than just ourselves in mind. We are invited to consider relationships and responsibility when we make decisions.

Robin Wall Kimmerer tells the story of a farmer near where she lives that invited the neighbors to come and freely pick from her field of serviceberries. It was a nice and noble

gesture, but it was also perplexing. Our author asked the farmer, “Why [did you] do it, especially in these pandemic days, when every small business is struggling to make ends meet.” The woman replied, “Well, they’re so abundant. There’s more than enough to share, and people could use a little goodness in their lives right now...Everyone’s so sad now, but in the berry patch all I hear are happy voices. It feels good to give that little bit of delight.” Later, she offers more about why she opened her farm in this way. “It’s not really altruism,” she insists, “An investment in community always comes back to you in some way. Maybe people who come for Serviceberries will come back for Sunflowers, and then for the Blueberries. Sure, it’s a gift, but it’s also good marketing. The gift builds relationships, and that’s always a good thing. That’s what we really produce here—relationship, with each other and with the farm.”

Sometimes I believe the church, in all its forms, forgets this very basic purpose about why we’re here. We are here to build relationships with one another, and between ourselves and God. That means we need to think long term about how we share our facility, how we engage with the public, what we stand for, and how to make long-term relationships with people. Too many people in the church are focused on the numbers of people in the pews and dollars in the account. While those things matter, they are the outcome of the church living out its primary purpose as representative of the Kingdom of God. In the words of the farmer, Paulie, from our book, “People will want to come back to a place they have a relationship with.” That’s important in business, but even more important in the church.

Our Luke scripture makes a similar point. Jesus begins in verse 22 exhorting disciples not to worry about food or clothing. This scripture often gets misquoted and misused. The point is that disciples are invited to focus on the Kingdom of Heaven, not on material possessions. In their commentary on this passage, Amy-Jill Levine and Ben Witherington III explain, “Jesus’ words can provide valuable instruction as long as they are not heard apart from the very real needs of the poor. For some, life is food, for the alternative, starving to death, occurs daily in parts of the globe...Jesus is not issuing a call to be careless or stupid. His call is to replace fear with faith, anxiety with trust, greed with generosity. Because the call is communal, he places responsibilities on everyone, rich and poor alike...The call is idealistic, but also means that life should be one of mutual reciprocity.” I feel like we have heard that somewhere before!

To be clear, to read Jesus’ words out of context “might lead to the conclusion that ‘God will provide’; to read them in the context of the Bible and the Jewish tradition, we find that this divine provision requires us to act in the image of the divine...If everything works as it should, the hungry receive food, the naked receive clothing, and the dying receive compassion. Jesus is advising his followers to determine what is of ultimate import for their lives.”

That’s what we have been talking about for weeks now. It’s not bad to have money or not to have money. But when it becomes our sole focus in life, then all kinds of things get out of whack. And constant pursuit of money can lead us to all kinds of anxieties. If we instead found ways to be community, to find our abundance and share it, and looked for opportunities to be God’s hands and feet, then needs would be met and the whole

community would flourish. Rampant, unbridled capitalism can leave many behind and this is what Jesus and later Robin Wall Kimmerer are criticizing.

In the end, we're called to value people over things. Wall Kimmerer puts it this way, "I cherish the notion of the gift economy, that we might back away from the grinding system, which reduces everything to a commodity and leaves most of us bereft of what we really want: a sense of belonging and relationship and purpose and beauty, which can never be commoditized...Anthropologists who study gift economies note that they function well in small, tightly knit communities. You might rightly observe that we no longer live in small, close-knit societies, where generosity and mutual esteem structure our relations. But we could."

But we could.

In the many blessed names of God. Amen.