

“The Serviceberry Economy”

Rev. Greg Watling

First Congregational United Church of Christ, Gaylord, Michigan

Sunday, September 28, 2025

Texts: 1 Corinthians 12: 1-11 and Mark 11: 15-18

I love the way that the *First Nations Translation* begins the familiar passage from 1 Corinthians 12 about spiritual gifts. It begins, “Now, my sacred family members...” What does it mean that someone or something is sacred? If something or someone is sacred, then it deserves “veneration” -- according to the definition of the word sacred. Veneration? What’s that? To treat it with great respect or reverence. In this culture, there is very little that is sacred. In fact, we have become so detached from our neighbors, the earth, and even matters of the spirit that there is little sacred anymore. And when we become detached, we can treat people and planet as things to be owned, manipulated, or even destroyed. We need an alternative way to live, and I believe that Robin Wall Kimmerer in her book *The Serviceberry: Abundance and Reciprocity in the Natural World* can give us some clues about how we might think of both people and things differently. She proposes that we move away from our present economic ways to more of a gift economy.

This may be a struggle for those of us so conditioned to the ways of the world, but what if we tried to live more in a gift economy than we presently do? What could change for the better? These changes might improve not only our relationship with our planet and our money, but maybe they would improve the way we relate to other people. And if other people became more sacred then perhaps, we wouldn’t have so much human destruction in our culture.

She writes:

In a serviceberry economy, I accept the gift from the tree and then spread that gift around, with a dish of berries to my neighbor, who makes a pie to share with his friend, who feels so wealthy in food and friendship that he volunteers at the food pantry. You know how it goes.

In contrast, if I were to buy a basket of berries in a market economy, the relationship ends with the exchange of money. Once I hand over my credit card, I have no further exchange with the clerk or the store. We're done. I own these berries now and can do with them as I like. The clerk, the corporation, and I – the customer – have a strictly material transaction. There is no making of community, only trading of commodities. Think of how strange—but wonderful—it would feel if you met the clerk on the street and they asked for your recipe for Serviceberry pie. That would be out-of-bounds. But if those berries were a gift, you'd probably still be chatting.

To name the world as gift is to feel your membership in the web of reciprocity.

Some of us might think that this is literally pie-in-the-sky thinking. “Money makes the world go round,” they say. Money gives me power, status and—we think—freedom. Money is the reason we get up (or got up) to go to work in the morning. Money has enabled us to purchase our car, our house, or that vacation (if we had enough of it). Money provides security as those who can afford it can choose to live far away from those who don't have the money to do so. Money informs my choices and gives me the ability to own things. All of that is true. No one is arguing we don't need money at all. In fact, you'll get a stewardship letter soon that asks for some of your money so that we might keep this congregation going, pay our staff, pay the bills, and make something beautiful in the world. Money is a tool to get all of that done. We all need some of it. But is Robin Wall Kimmerer right that often money gets in the way of relationship?

She contends that “to name the world as gift is to feel our membership in the web of reciprocity. It makes you happy—and it makes you accountable.” I thought the need for

money makes us accountable. Money spurs us to get a job. To get a job, we learned a trade, or we went to college. How does a gift economy make someone accountable? She tells some good stories that I think will get your mind going about how this might work.

“Conceiving of something as a gift changes your relationship to it in a profound way, even though the physical makeup of the “thing” has not changed. A woolly knit hat that your purchase at a store will keep you warm regardless of its origin, but if it was hand-knit by your favorite auntie, then you are in relationship to that “thing” in a very different way: you are responsible for it, and your gratitude has motive force in the world.” She goes on to assert that the recipient of the hat that was hand-made is far more likely to take better care of the gift hat than the commodity hat, because the gift hat is knit of relationships. That is the power of gift thinking. “I imagine,” Kimmerer writes, “if we acknowledged that everything we consume is the gift of Mother Earth, we would take better care of what we are given.”

Further, “mistreating a gift has emotional and ethical gravity as well as ecological resonance.” She goes to tell the story of a spring. I invite you to relax and just hear about this spring and how you might relate to it:

...the water is icy cold and gushes out of the ground. It almost makes you dizzy with its cold vitality. I drink from my cupped hands, splash my face, and fill my canteen for later. Is this how water was meant to be—free and pure? How long has it been since you drank wild water? It feels like a gift to me. The life of that water became my life—and my joy in its presence.

If you and I thought of that water as a commodity, what might we do? We might dam it up, bottle it up and sell it to the highest bidder. Of course, we’d make a lot of money, but we would likely destroy not only the spring, but everything that is downstream. Our author

wants to think that the consequences of such actions would be more than just ruination of the water quality. It would also be an emotional breach. Further, how we think is how we behave. “When something moves from the status of gift to the status of commodity, we can become detached from mutual responsibility. We know the consequences of that detachment.”

If we know that, then why have we permitted the dominance of economic systems that commoditize everything? That create scarcity instead of abundance, that promote accumulation rather than sharing? Kimmerer states that, “We’ve surrendered our values to an economic system that actively harms what we love.” At the same time, she admits, “I am harnessed to this economy, in ways large and small, yoked to pervasive extraction. I’m wondering how we fix that. And I’m not alone.”

I don’t know if there is an easy fix for economic ways, or human interactions. But I do know this: we are increasingly commoditizing people, places, resources –you name it—and it can go too far. Because with it comes detachment. There are a lot of things in this world I care a whole lot more about because of relationships with others. Relationships and some form of healthy attachment to others forces me to look at the world differently than if I just went after the money. Relationships bring with them memories, new learnings, and often help when I need it most. They are often based on mutual trust and reciprocity. But not enough of my relationships are this way. Sure, some level of detachment is necessary of individual healthy personhood, but I do think that it’s gone so far that we may be in danger of becoming so detached that we think as long as we have money, we don’t need anybody.

Taken to its unfortunate, but logical conclusion, if I don't need you, then I don't care what happens to you. And the same goes for you in relation to me.

We need to do better, my sacred family members. May we begin to see more and more gifts present in this world around us—both the natural world and our personal world—and begin to treat one another and this world as the gifts we are.

In the many blessed names of God, Amen.