

PSALM 100 (responsive)

Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth.

Worship the Lord with gladness; come into his presence with singing.

Know that the Lord is God. It is he that made us and we are his.

We are his people and the sheep of his pasture.

Enter his gates with thanksgiving, and his courts with praise. Give thanks to him, bless his name.

For the Lord is good; his steadfast love endures forever, and his faithfulness to all generations.

LUKE 12:13-21; 32-34

A man in the crowd said to Jesus, “Master, tell my brother to divide the family property with me.” Jesus replied, “My good man, who set me over you to judge or arbitrate?” Then he said to the people, “Beware! Be on your guard against greed of every kind, for even when a man has more than enough, his wealth does not give him life.”

And he told them this parable: “There was a rich man whose land yielded heavy crops. He debated with himself: What am I to do? I have not the space to store my produce. This is what I will do: I will pull down my storehouses and build them bigger. I will collect in them all my corn and other goods, and then say to myself, Man, you have plenty of good things laid by, enough for many years. Take life easy, eat, drink, and enjoy yourself.

But God said to him, “You fool, this very night you must surrender your life. You have made your money—who will get it now?” That is how it is with the man who amasses wealth for himself and remains a pauper in the sight of God....

Have no fear, little flock for your Father has chosen to give you the Kingdom. Sell your possessions and give in charity. Provide for yourselves purses that do not wear out and never failing treasures in heaven where no thief can get near it, no moth destroy it. For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.

FEAR'S ANTIDOTE

Psalm 100
Luke 12:13-21; 32-34

A beggar had been working his way through a small town for days without much success when he saw the golden coach of the king pulled by magnificent looking horses approaching him. "Aha!" thought he. "Maybe my fortunes have turned!" Surely the king would be compassionate and give him a healthy donation. His anticipation rose when the king indeed ordered his driver to stop so he could speak to him. But instead of pulling out his money bag, the king asked the beggar for a donation. The poor man was shocked, but fearing he might be beaten if he did not give the king something, he reached into his own satchel which was filled with a variety of grains and pulled out a single kernel of corn which he grudgingly handed to the king. The king then departed without a word and the beggar sadly went on his way. That evening, when he emptied his bag on the ground, he was stunned to discover that a single kernel of corn had turned to gold. He then broke down in tears wishing he had given the king the entire contents of his satchel.

The story captures a fundamental truth regarding our relationships to money. Its importance in our lives is unquestioned because it represents not only real power which allows us the ability to provide both basic necessities as well as many extravagances as we can afford, but also is a significant determinant in our perception of self worth. And because of these factors, there is always going to be an element of fear when it comes to giving it away. We like to hang onto it because it serves as a safety net for possible future importunity. So it gives us a sense of comfort and besides, the value system of our society has led us to believe that you can never really have enough.

It's funny. I have noticed among my golfing companions, a couple of whom we whisper about behind their backs that they have more money than God, are also the stingiest when it comes to giving it away. And we tease them suggesting that they are afraid to open their

wallets for fear a moth would fly out.

One of these gentlemen who is now deceased grew up in poverty and without a small loan of a million dollars from his father became a self made millionaire through his wits and hard work selling used cars. He used to brag that his net worth was between 10 and 12 million depending upon the current state of the market. I recall that following a major national disaster when all citizens were encouraged to donate to relief efforts, he patted himself on the back for his \$200 contribution. I half jokingly kidded him asking, "That's all?" Of course, it was really none of my business, but he had brought it up. And he looked at me sternly and replied, "Look, I pay my taxes. The government has my money already and they are the ones who should be paying for this!"

I knew where he was coming from. He grew up poor, had busted his butt to acquire his wealth and the fear of returning to poverty was so deep in his bones that he kept an iron grip on his money. I was thinking about him when I chose our scripture for this morning. *There was a rich man whose land yielded heavy crops. He debated with himself: What am I to do? I have not the space to store my produce...So I will pull down my storehouses and build them bigger. I will collect in them all my goods and then say to myself, "Man, you have plenty of good things laid by, enough for many years. Take life easy, eat, drink, and enjoy yourself."*

Of course, my friend died as all of us will and like all of us, he did not take his wealth with him. *You have made your money—who will get it now? That is how it is with the man who amasses wealth for himself and remains a pauper in the sight of God.* What a powerful statement! To be earth wealthy, but spiritually impoverished. And the root of this impoverishment has to be fear. In the sight of our human neighbors, our value as people is very much tied up with monetary achievements. Who could possibly deny that society judges us by the visible symbols of our assets? But in the sight of God, wealth is viewed from the perspective of our generosity.

This is why our stewardship is such a vital cog in our spiritual lives. Because it requires

of us to confront the challenge of overcoming our fear of parting with some of our perceived power. And the great irony of this is that giving is one of the most powerful and empowering acts that we can perform. In fact, giving is actually the antidote to fear and is the gateway to living with joy and thanksgiving.

Let's unpack this a little more. In Bob Woodward's recent book about the Trump administration which is entitled, "Fear", he includes excerpts from a conversation with Trump in which they discuss the concept of power. And Trump is very clear about his belief that you must create fear to both attain and retain your hold on power. He was absolutely right and if you listen to politicians of all stripes in their campaigning, they continually try to alarm you with predictions of what their opponents will do if they are elected. It is hardly a new strategy. Look what Hitler did by creating a fear of Jews. And when you can hit the right buttons often enough, people will gratefully hand over their own power to you to protect them from those you now believe threaten your security. If you study dictators, this is how they work. And once you cede power to them, it may take a revolution to get it back.

There is a further dynamic at work as well. What fear does to us psychologically is cause us to constrict. When people are afraid, they close down. You can see it in their body language, folding their arms to hold themselves together. And that is why fear is probably the greatest impediment to generosity. We feel compelled to hold on tight to what we have. The emotional consequence of this, however, is not a sense of greater security, but more of a chronic tightness we experience in our chests. You know when you have closed yourself off—you feel it right here in your heart.

Jesus is all over this in his sequel to the parable. *Have no fear, little flock, for your Father has chosen to give you the Kingdom. Sell your possessions and give in charity. Provide for yourselves purses that do not wear out and never failing treasures in heaven...for where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.*

And we unequivocally know this to be true. When we withhold, we constrict; when we

give we open. We can breathe, we can feel love, we are light inside. Giving is gratifying because it connects us to the whole and when we have the experience of contributing to the welfare of the whole, it is ironically the most self-serving of all actions. And instead of keeping us closed, it opens us and creates space to receive. As author H. Jackson Brown Jr. wrote, "Remember that the happiest people are not those getting more, but those giving more."

So stewardship is the greatest opportunity the church can give you for feeling really good about yourself. Remember that the Kingdom is yours and that the Kingdom is not somewhere out there on a cloud, but within. You enter it through the door of your heart in acts of generosity, in your service to others.

And so as we fill out our pledge cards today and celebrate Thanksgiving on Thursday with friends and family, let us *Make a joy noise to the Lord...Let us enter his gates with thanksgiving and his courts with praise...For the Lord is good; his steadfast love endures forever, and his faithfulness to all generations.*

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