

Money and Meaning: Looking with Gratitude
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At the heart of our relationship to money is living and giving with gratitude—whether the assets we have to give are monetary, or our own capital of time and energy for the sake of the human family. As a result of aligning our money practices with the courageous vision we see for ourselves and our impact on the world, we end our series by looking for the hope that has been cultivated and the possibility that we will transform fear to gratitude in the act of sharing.

In the movie “It’s a Wonderful Life” the angel, Clarence, showed George Bailey how many lives he had deeply blessed, and declared...

“You see, George, you really had a wonderful life...”

At the end of the movie, there is a joyful celebration of community and generosity and George Bailey’s thankfulness is infectious. George’s brother, Harry, lifts his glass and proclaims:

“A toast ... to my big brother George. The richest man in town!”

Perhaps Harry is commenting on the big pile of money given to George by his community to help bail him out of trouble...but it’s also a commentary on the many friends who showed up to show him they won’t let him face his troubles alone.

On top of that pile of money, George finds a book, and inside, the angel Clarence has left an inscription:

Voice of Clarence: “Remember, no [one] is a failure who has friends!”

Indeed, Clarence the angel finally gets his wings in the end. As the whole community gathered in George’s house looks on, a bell rings, a sign that the reverberations of generosity were being felt in heaven as on earth.

George always gave from the heart. He was always open and honest with others about the financial state of the bank, what he was giving, and why he was giving. He wasn’t pressured into the generosity he practiced; his father, his wife, his bank customers, didn’t shame or blame him into the sacrifices he made. Nor did he shame or blame himself. He gave from his heart. He didn’t ask for guarantees before he gave his heart, his time, his talent, his money; he gave when and if it felt right.

This month we have been Looking (get lantern) at our relationship with money, and the meaning that money has in our lives. We have especially been challenging the reluctance, the skittishness, that many of us feel about talking about money – because the subject of money often brings up strong, and often unpleasant, emotions. It is no surprise that money is the number one topic of marital quarrels. Money, and budgets, can be a very difficult topic to talk about, and a church budget is no exception.

For a time, I belonged to a church that solved *that* problem by expecting its members to tithe – give 10% of their *gross* income to the church – and never, ever letting members know what the

leaders did with their money. Even though as a kid I was raised in the Congregational UCC church, and went through confirmation classes – what we call Coming of Age – in ninth grade, I was never taught about how our congregation handled its money, or how decisions were made. So, when I was a Mormon, all those years, I thought all churches asked their members to give “to God” and just trust that church leaders were doing “God’s will” with their hard-earned funds.

It was a shock, after I left the Mormon church, when I saw my first church budget printed out in the materials for the congregational meeting. It felt like a gift. It felt like the leaders trusted me, trusted their members to take part in decisions about how their church was run. It felt amazing that leaders would feel they should be accountable to the people.

As I think about Looking with Gratitude this morning, one thing that I am personally deeply grateful for is that our congregation practices a democratic form of self-governance, including open and transparent handling of pledges and offerings and a say in their responsible use.

Part of that responsibility includes talking about our needs and wants and hopes and desires openly and realistically, making space for all perspectives, taking time to make informed and responsible decisions. I’m grateful for the forums that allow such discussions to happen, and for the number of people who show up engaged and ready to work hard to make sure that all voices are really heard and considered.

It is awesome how many ways we are actually living out our values, right here and now. That shows up in the way we work hard to balance our desire to do good with our need to deal with the realities and challenges that come to every congregation. That’s where the rubber meets the road. We try to take care to preserve our endowment and our buildings for the benefit of our people now and for future generations. The way we fund our priorities shows evidence of what we value as a congregation: fair compensation to our employees, environmental concerns (PH windows, recycling), our national UUA, our half-plate giving, to name a few. The rubber also meets the road in our congregational policies: where we buy our power, who we rent to, what’s on our website, who is welcome, arts and music, and more. And the rubber meets the road in our culture (made up of thousands of individual actions over time): welcome; community; liberal church in this spot; generosity]

This is the start of Stewardship season, when your elected Board members begin to figure out what the financial needs of the community might be in the next fiscal year, which begins July 1. This planning is only possible if we have some idea how much money to expect from members, so we are asked to pledge: to indicate how much we feel we can reasonably expect to contribute to the church budget in the next year. Then the proposed budget is presented to the church members at annual meeting in June, for discussion and a vote.

So, at this time of year, church leaders have to face down their reluctance and actually ask for money – more money, because the reality is we are always asking for offerings, fundraising dollars, and contributions to good causes, inside our congregation and the wider world. Those who have the ability to give generously, usually do. Those who can’t give as many dollars often feel badly that they can’t – people sometimes tell ministers these things – and wish they could

give more. But to make your annual pledge means you are promising money you don't yet have, and that's kind of a different kettle of fish.

I have had many conversations with the Stewardship team in the past few months. They are working hard to prepare materials to inform you about our financial picture this year, our needs and hopes and dreams for the future, as they prepare for the pledge drive. But with all those reports and pie charts and percentages, sometimes the bigger messages get lost in all the details. So, here are some things that Stewardship and the Board told me they want you to know:

- Stewardship is not a measure of worth. The amount you can pledge should have no bearing on how you are valued in this congregation, where you sit in church, what events you are invited to, or how much attention you get from leaders. Pledges are confidential; the amount you pledge as an individual is known only to a very few, who keep track of pledge fulfillment and issue tax statements. Your minister and church leadership understand – many of us from personal experience – that the money we have available is not always a reflection of our character, ability, self-discipline, or values. Our worth is inborn and not dependent on our circumstances.
- Please pledge. Turn in a pledge form. Pledge what you think you can and want to give; you can always contact Stewardship or the Board later on if you want to raise or lower your pledge. If your circumstances are such that you just don't know what you can spare each month, pledge a dollar. If that is not possible, please speak briefly to the minister and obtain a waiver – “I need a waiver” is all you need to say, though if you'd like to lean on my shoulder, vent, or brainstorm with me about it while you're at it, it's one of the things I am here for. But let us know what to plan on, please. When the new pledge forms become available in the next couple of weeks – we'll have an online form as well – make the most realistic pledge you can, based on what you know right now.
- This is your church. If you have suggestions, recommendations, problems, or even just interest for how we manage our income, expenses, and investments – yes, we have an endowment – please talk to someone in leadership. Your message will reach the right people, who would love to talk with you about the process. Come to the forums, read the materials sent out in preparation for the annual meeting – the annual report – and come to Annual Meeting ready to discuss and vote. Your leaders are trying hard to keep you informed of what is happening, and if you have suggestions for ways to improve communication, please let us know.
- Stewardship is about more than just money. Stewardship is invitation – so we can keep our doors open, so we will always find a warm, welcoming, accepting congregation here to embrace us in all our seasons. It's important that we are here! It's important to remember that money is only one of the gifts, the treasures, that we share with our community.

Because this Beloved Community that we are building, we are tending, we are part of, is the reason for all the rest.

We have heard from members who have shared their witness of how much this community means to them. What we have heard is a story of welcome, of values, of honesty, of compassion, of appreciation, of opportunities to give in ways that make their lives bloom. We have heard about a sense of communal well-being, rooted in the need for things like nature and beauty and creative work alongside covering the basic human needs for survival.

It includes spiritual needs that are as essential to human survival as food and shelter. It's a sense of community that is invested in seeing each other thrive and walking with each other through the trials and joys and adventures of life. It's rooted in a gratitude that turns whatever we have into enough. This kind of deep gratitude leads to deeper resilience, more profound compassion for others, more awareness of the sacred, more commitment to justice.

I took the challenge myself to think about my own wonderings and gratitude for the congregation. We'll be hearing these stories from time to time over the next couple of months; if you have a story you'd like to tell, I have these prompts and I'll be happy to give you one.

My Witness

"What I have a sense of wonder about is..." [something awesome about the work of the church that is happening now]

How awesome it is that we are a generous, values-driven, caring Beloved Community that is working hard to keep growing and thriving together.

"What I wonder is, what if..." [a vision of what could be possible in the church's future work]

what would happen if we each found one thing in our church that excites or calls to us, and decided to give to that? One thing, given with all our heart – and I know many of us are doing this; but if we are feeling stale or burned out, maybe we let go of what we're doing and look for the one thing that sparks joy. (come talk to me) What sense of new life might permeate our congregation if we all found real joy in what we are giving?

[End with something like...]

"I am so grateful that First Parish is part of my 'wonder-full life.'"