

# Kate Cudlipp: Quid Pro Quo or Gift?

Sermon by Kate Cudlipp

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## Quid Pro Quo or Gift?

The passages immediately preceding and following today's lectionary scriptures from Acts tells the interesting story of Simon, the magician. I would like to read the surrounding verses and take the liberty of working with them rather than confining today's word to the three assigned verses. [Read [Acts 8: 9-13, 18-24.](#)]

Simon is described in one commentary as the antithesis of Philip, and it serves our purposes to look at how this is so. I would like, especially, to examine the attitudes of the two toward money.

Philip the Evangelist (not to be confused with Philip the Apostle!) was the disciple who was appointed, as one of seven, to see that food was fairly distributed to the Hellenist widows of the Christian community. He was thus one of the early Christians who agreed to hold material wealth in common and see to the needs of all in the community. He was not paid for his preaching; he baptized without compensation. He was responding with his life to the call of Christ.

Simon was a magician who plied his trade for money. For him, money reflected how he was valued; the better he was at what he did, the more he was worth. A "quid pro quo" outlook characterized his life; everything could be bought for the right price. Although Simon is clearly the bad guy in the story, he more closely resembles what today's culture values

than does Philip. Simon was at the top of his profession; he apparently made good money; he was a celebrity. Philip was more the middle manager who prepares the way for the top dogs, Peter and John, who appear when the glamorous work is to be done: the invoking of the Holy Spirit.

What enabled Philip to be whom he was, to know that money is a means to an end and is to be shared, to know that life is not, at its heart, about quid pro quo but about gift? The simple answer is to say that Philip had received the Holy Spirit, but that really doesn't tell us much that is useful. What does help is to notice that the Holy Spirit most often comes to people in the company of others; it is not an event that takes place when one is solitary.

We do live in a world where there is the practical necessity for "quid pro quo." Very few of us will receive the wherewithal to live without working, without earning our way. The challenge is to live with a sense of freedom in spite of worldly realities, to live knowing that what is truly important is not earned, not bought, that giving is natural, that is, in our very nature as children of God.

The challenge is to learn to hold lightly – not tightly – that which we have received. We are, as our Epiphany theme reminds us, "in the world." How do we live in the world, seeing beneath the surface glitter and blare to truth? Everything in our tradition tells us we do this in community, in true community.

Community is what distinguished Philip – and us – from Simon. As best we can tell, Simon had to rely on himself for what he needed and wanted, and he was out for himself. His material resources came from his own efforts, as did his sense of himself. His satisfaction came from being praised, from being the best at what he did. He could never let down, never relax his guard, for if he did, he would lose both his livelihood and his reputation – which was the basis of his self-esteem.

We do live in community. How does this help pull back the curtain of illusions about what is truly important in life and reveal deeper truths behind?

One way is that living in community allows us to glimpse life as gift that we receive from others – without strings, without demands for repayment or for groveling gratitude. Jane Engle told me about her experience, during an illness, of feeling loved and cared for by other Seekers, not out of a sense of charity but out of an authentic sense of connection. This is gift. In this community we see gifts of money to individual Seekers through the Holy Spirit Fund, where the only "string" is to be true to one's call and to share the journey with others. We see gifts of quilts, listening, child and pet care, transportation. To receive any of these is to experience love and care that is not earned.

Another way that community shows us true life is that it brings us into contact – into connection – with a variety of lives that we would not likely encounter on our own. One of the evil things money enables is the distancing of those with wealth from the degradation our way of life brings to others and to the planet. Look at where and how we live.

In this community we are offered numerous opportunities to narrow that distance, to be reminded of the injustice our worldly systems are built on and, perhaps, in seeing the plight of other human beings and the ravaging of the earth, to find it easier in small and large ways, to let go of what we thought was crucial to hold onto.

I think about who and what I have been connected to in some way because of my connection to other Seekers: to Dr. Guzman and ASAPROSAR in El Salvador because of Ron Arms; to street children in South Africa because of Roy Barber; to Joyce Freeman and her multiple surgeries and seven children through Mary Carol; to tough kids in Alexandria through Don Bush; to Kodwo and Maxine Ankrah in Uganda because of Sarah Goodwin and

others; to sick Russian children through Billy Amoss; to ecological contamination and destruction through Cathy Cochrane's work. The list goes on; these are just examples. I hope you will add to this list in your own reflections about whom community has introduced you to. It is very hard to insulate ourselves when our eyes and hearts are opened to such a variety of human needs and ecological realities.

Community not only exposes us to opportunities to give and receive and to change the way we use our resources, but also pushes us, through disciplines and structures of accountability, to take stock of those opportunities and of our responses, to look at ourselves honestly to see where our actions do or do not follow our convictions.

I want to invite everyone to take a step on a revelatory journey – a journey for each of us to see if our use of our material resources – our wealth – is in keeping with our convictions. Do we put our money where our mouths are?

If you are like me, the idea of thinking about where money fits into your life is not appealing. I would rather do my necessary financial transactions, and as long as I can meet my obligations, not think about how my getting and spending is related to my soul.

That was Simon's approach. He associated with good people, people who were being baptized, people who received the Holy Spirit. The author of Acts tells us that he believed, in some fashion. But in the final analysis, his failure to understand the relation between his wealth and God's call imperiled his soul.

As I began to work on this sermon, I became increasingly aware of how complex my relationship to money is and of how I don't even know the reasons I am so averse to working with the issues. *That* tells me this is an area that needs my spiritual focus.

Julie and Ron Arms and Trish Nemore and Pat Conover have worked much more consciously with their families' resources and expenditures than I, or I suspect, most of us. That work helped them check out whether their actions were consistent with their convictions and freed them from some assumptions and patterns that kept them from seeing the abundance rather than the scarcity in their lives. I doubt that any of them would say their work around material resources is done, but they are good models for many of us who have been less willing to confront the idolatrous and demonic aspects of money.

Most churches don't deal with money questions very well, and frankly, we haven't done so well in Seekers. Money is a more private affair these days than sex. The way that money issues are addressed – when they are addressed – is most often not conducive to deep spiritual searching. The emphasis is on meeting a budget, and the most frequent response is a quick – and somewhat guilt-driven – decision to give something so as not to have to think about "it" – money/resources/priorities/needs/fears – any longer.

Marjory, who is the convener of the Financial Oversight Group – FOG – of Seekers, has made up cards for each person or family to take home and fill in. The point of these cards is not to elicit a guilty or perfunctory response. It is intended as one step in what I hope will be an ongoing process to help us deal with money as a spiritual issue.

This first step asks you to think about Seekers, about what we use our communal resources for, about whether what calls to you is represented in our corporate giving. It asks that you consider the extent to which you want to – and can – invest in Seekers' life and then write down your commitment and put it in the offering plate on a Sunday this month.

This first step is thus an invitation to become involved in the Seekers budget, to learn how we spend and give our money. We will be publishing in *Soundings* periodically during the

year announcements of those receiving Seekers' funds and something about whom the recipients are. The budget is not something disconnected from any of us. It is not a dry, financial statement but a concrete response to the world from the heart and soul of this community.

Further steps which I hope the FOG will initiate, will encourage more open conversation about money – to de-idolize and de-demonize it and to let it be a pathway into the real spiritual questions that it obscures: Who do we depend on? What gives us value as human beings?

Among these further steps might be opportunities to write a money autobiography to see what role money has played in your life, to work with another Seeker, perhaps annually, on your issues with money, and possibly to have sessions on various practical aspects of money management and use, if those would be useful to some.

Having chosen to belong to this community is a "Yes" each of us has answered to a call. For now we have been called to Seekers. This community is the context in which each of us is enabled to hear more clearly God's ongoing call on our lives. The way we use our material resources – our money – will grow out of our broadening and deepening understanding of that call. To turn our backs on the invitation to deepen that understanding, to turn our backs on engagement with what we have been given and what we have to give, is to risk Simon's fate.

You've heard the call, now will you answer?