

“Money Matters” by Marjory Bankson

March 3, 2013



The Third Sunday in Lent

Two weeks ago, Deborah launched us into Lent with her sermon about the Temptations of Jesus and how the Devil departed “until a more opportune time.” She reminded us that the “more opportune time” could be now, here, in our midst. She talked about her own Lenten discipline of directly asking God for guidance in ordinary daily matters to counteract what she called her “functional atheism.” That is, the tendency that most of us have of living as though we had no ongoing relationship with God. Lent, she said, is a time to jumpstart our relationship with God again.

Today, I want to speak about money as a Lenten practice. How we deal with money is one of the hardest things to talk about in community or family. That makes it a likely place to expect a visit from the Devil, and that might make it a good place to confront our “functional atheism.”

We can begin with that wonderful passage from Isaiah 55: “Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you that have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price.”

It is an open invitation to everyone, rich and poor alike, to come and be nourished by God. Notice that money itself is not bad, and the marketplace of exchange is welcomed by Isaiah, but the buying and selling has a different basis. There is nothing exclusive or judgmental here. One only has to recognize their thirst for God amid all the substitutes that we spend money for – and that's not as easy as it sounds.

This amazing passage, from what we call "Second Isaiah," was written during the Exile period, when the Hebrews were displaced to Babylon, where they were scorned and impoverished –humiliated as a beaten people. Surely they felt abandoned by God, but somehow this prophet can see another reality. Beyond the hardships they are suffering, Isaiah sings of God's love for all who know they are hungry and thirsty for more than the stuff and services that money can buy in the marketplace.

Using the paradoxical language of "buying without money," Isaiah points us in the direction of a God who longs to fill us with good things that satisfy our deepest longings. "Why do you spend money for that which is not bread? And your labor for that which does not satisfy?" he asks.

Why, indeed.

So now I'm going to get practical and talk about money as a spiritual discipline and a Lenten practice. You may have noticed the Seekers budget which is posted on the back bulletin board. You can see what we spend our collective resources on. There's no way to measure the incredible wealth of talent and time that we have also given to sustain our life and mission together, but the budget does track our money. Last year, this little congregation gave nearly \$240,000 in Sunday morning offerings and much more than that if we count earmarked funds for Bokamoso. Today our budget is ten times larger than the amount of our first budget, 35 years ago.

With about the same number of people, have we gotten that much richer? Or have we learned to give more freely?

In 1976, the 19 original members (as Stewards were called then) planned for a budget of \$25,000. They divided our expenses into three categories: 20% for space (we were renting then); 40% for inreach (mainly to pay our co-pastors, Fred and Sonya) and 40% for outreach. From the beginning, they claimed God's promise to provide manna for each day, so we did not carry funds from one year to the next. They purposely chose to be open and transparent about our common funds as a way to encourage everyone to be more conscious about money. As a friend of mine remarked, "Money is like blood in the Body of Christ. It's life-giving, but it has to keep moving."

Here's where my story begins. When we arrived at Seekers, I was a potter, selling my handmade soup-bowls and mugs at every little craft show in town. I had been a school teacher, so this was not my first job, but the money I was making as a potter felt different somehow – as though I was making it with my own hands. It was mine! And I wanted to spend it on things that I thought I needed.

That's where Lent caught up with me. I decided to try giving a small percentage of my pottery income to Seekers as a Lenten discipline. I think it was 3%. The point was intention, not the amount. It meant figuring my income and expenses every week, and sometimes there was no income to record. Even when I put nothing in the plate, I was much more conscious of the in and out flow of money during the six weeks of Lent because of my intention to give regularly.

I was in Mission Support Group at the time, but I don't recall telling anybody what I was doing. I did not experience it as freedom from the grip that money had on me, but what I did notice was that it gave me more interest in what Seekers did with "our" money. And because I was not a Steward then, I wanted to know more about how those decisions were made, and what our missions were. Looking back, I believe that my secret experiment with giving some of "my money" to Seekers started me on the path toward commitment and caring in this community.

Money was the key that began to unlock my heart for Seekers.

Today, our total budget for next year comes to \$300,000. 22% will be spent on building operations; only 29% will go for community life, as inreach is now called. And a whopping 49% will be given to others in support of missions that we are actively involved in.

A couple of weeks ago, all of us were invited to attend a meeting after church in order to decide about the distribution of our international giving funds – and those recipients are posted on the back bulletin board. We made a three-year commitment to Bokamoso and Othandweni in South Africa, and to PAVA, the organization that we work with for the Guatemala Pilgrimage.

In a couple of weeks, on March 17, you will be invited to attend another decision-making session to allocate \$60,000 of Seekers money for domestic missions. Even if you do not have the means to give much through Seekers, you can learn a lot about this community by participating in one of these allocation meetings – because it is true, that where we give money, a portion of our heart goes there as well.

“Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you that have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price. Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy? Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good.... Incline your ear, and come to me; listen, so you may live.”

Now let's turn to the Gospel reading for today. The parable which Jesus tells – about a fig tree with no fruit, and a vine-dresser who suggests another year of intensive cultivation before cutting it down – can also be related to money. The owner says, “For three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree, and still I find none. Cut it down! Why should it be wasting the soil?” In other words, the

soil is meant to produce fruit!

I have a hard time hearing the owner say "I've given it three years. Cut it down." And yet we know that endings come, often more suddenly than that. Some of us have lost a job with little notice. Or we've come to the end of a marriage, or received a diagnosis that we didn't expect. I wonder sometimes whether Jesus knew he had only three years to engage with his disciples?

In spiritual terms, the gift of life is meant to be rooted in a community and produce fruits of the spirit. According to Galatians 5:22, the fruits of the spirit are these: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. I particularly noticed "generosity" and "self control" on that list as I thought about giving as a Lenten discipline.

In this story, I see Jesus as the vine-dresser who asks for another year of intensive gardening before cutting down the tree. That's grace. Unearned. Undeserved. Unmerited grace. It's what we all hope for when we live through hard times, when there's no apparent fruit developing on the bare branches of our lives. When we've spent our money for things that do not satisfy and have nothing but fuzzy memories or random pictures to show for it. And here's the point of my sermon: grace, and a little extra manure, is meant to unlock our hearts, meant to bear spiritual fruits. And sometimes that looks like the courage to end something, like an addictive behavior – mine was clutching my pottery money too tightly.

You may not know that Stewards give about 75% of the contributed income at Seekers, because that is part of our commitment – to give generously. For me, my Lenten experiment with money was the key that opened the door to becoming a Steward.

I want to leave you with this question. It is about the seeds of call to care for this community, this orchard of fig trees.

Are you one of those people who might step forward, as the vine-dresser did, and ask for one more year of intensive cultivation before cutting down a fig tree in your care? If so, that might be a sign that you are being called toward stewardship of this community.

Within the wider family of the Church of the Saviour, the Potter's House Church has come to the end of its life. As the number of Stewards dwindled to five, with only two really interested in the ministry of the Potter's House, the church there has set down its call to be a worshipping body. They have asked the C of S Council of Churches to hold the title to their building for a time while a transition team discerns a new direction. I see this as a respite time, a period of intense cultivation, to see whether that fig tree can bear fruit again. There are interested people, but not a church as the taproot.

It would be the same thing here, if the number of Stewards dwindled too far. We've been as small as 11 (in 1981) and as large as 26 (when we bought this building, in 1999). Now there are 14 Stewards at Seekers, who have made a commitment to care for the health and well-being of this community. We don't have any full-time staff members. We pay five people, including our Servant Leadership Team, a small stipend, but essentially we rely on the health and commitment of this core group for the bulk of our budget as well as guidance about what we spend our money for. That's one of the reasons we can give away nearly 50% of our income.

Years ago, I let a Lenten commitment to give a tiny percent of my income begin to lead me in the direction of stewardship here. I hope you will cultivate that possibility with a Lenten practice, even if you decide to start something today, halfway through Lent, in order to tend your spiritual life more closely. If you're considering a Lenten practice around money, I'd suggest that it's more about intention than amount. That could be the key that will unlock your heart.

May it be so. Amen.