

Denice Leslie
Gratitude Sunday (Stew. #3)
First Sunday in Advent
Dedication of Advent Candles
James 1: 19 – 27
Luke 15: 1 – 7

“Celebrate!”

Theologian Robert Ochs says there are three ways to take a gift: It may be taken for granted; it may be taken with guilt or taken with gratitude. How are you taking God's gifts to you, especially as they arrive through the hands of others?¹

That probably depends on how well each of us succeeds in understanding the difference between the values of the Kingdom of God and the values of the culture around us. In his outline of the seven deadly sins which he used to instruct his disciples in India, Gandhi captures the devastating downside of the values of the culture we live in:

1. Politics without principle
2. Wealth without work
3. Commerce without morality
4. Pleasure without conscience
5. Education without character
6. Science without humanity
7. Worship without sacrifice

These summarize the spiritual poverty all around us.² And I would add one more: a preoccupation with self that blocks out consciousness of the needs of others. Jesus teaches us that it is in giving we receive.

Christian writer, Mary O’Roark shares: “I was doing a book tour in San Diego, where it’s sunny all the time, which makes me nervous and cranky because I look bad in shorts.

Then I saw a picture of Koko the gorilla, who lives at the San Diego Zoo, and over the picture it said something like, “Mantra for the American Jungle: Remain calm and share your bananas.”

I loved that saying so much that every day for the rest of that tour, I wrote “RCSB” in ink on my hand, in that place between my forefinger and thumb, so when I started to get nervous or upset, I’d see those letters, and it would put things into perspective.”

Then she shares how RCSB reminded her of Mother Teresa, talking about how in America we have this terrible spiritual poverty. In India, she said, “you’ll see somebody in the gutter with a banana, and he’ll break it into thirds to share it with other people. In America, though, we stockpile our bananas so we have a bunch of them, and stuff them in our mouths as fast as we can, and come up with ways to make them ripen faster so we have more, more, more.

That’s what the devil’s about, the lie that if we get more fame, more money, more attention, more things, we’ll be OK. It speaks of this mangy, gringy tightness instead of the joy of God that makes you want to share with others.

We live the most when we’re giving. That’s why Jesus was such a radical. He says that everything in the world is going to tell you to grab onto as much as you can, then get more and more and don’t let anybody else have it. But none of that’s true.

Jesus says that where your treasure is, your heart will be, too. Don’t bank on the stuff that’s going to rot and get moldy and dusty and turn to ashes. *What’s going to last is what you give away.*

When you do God’s work, you just show up and love and serve. In the Bible, it says something like, “Go in peace to love and serve the world.”

It doesn’t say, “Stay here, get some more room service, and try to drum up a lot more sales for your book.” That sort of greedy thinking doesn’t really lead to a lot of spiritual happiness. **Get calm -- and go take care of God’s other**

¹ Homiletics Online: Illustrations: Stewardship.

² -Jim Wallis, Faith Works

(New York: Random House, 2000), 83.

children. Share your bananas. That's where you're going to get happy.³

Today we are here to celebrate our annual opportunity to commit to sharing our bananas! This is our opportunity to follow up our love and service in the world with our dollars to resource that mission!

Giving is a joy. If you don't know that it's because you haven't tried it.

Have you seen the Salvation Army Bell Ringer's add on TV this month? A picture is worth a thousand words!

As a Salvation Army bell ringer tolls her little Christmas bell, the spare change you and I give is graphically translated into the rescue of human brokenness and devastation: a homeless mother and her child huddled under a freeway overpass, a family stranded on the roof of their flooded home, a drunk lying at the bottom of a bus station stairway.... And you and I are a part of making that happen when we give, instead of by passing the red kettle and the persistent ring of the bell.

That ring is the ring of Christ's compassion calling us, beckoning to us—how we hear it tells us a lot about how we understand what it means to give:

Are we covetous, offended, guilty or annoyed that our holiday cheer is interrupted by the reminder of the less fortunate?

We claim to serve a Christ who was himself born in the humble, homeless circumstances of the poor. Now some will argue it was just a temporary condition. But the offering Mary and Joseph make in the temple following the birth of Jesus tells us otherwise: it is the offering prescribed for the poor in thanksgiving for the birth of a child. In Jesus God chose to sup with the least and the lost.

³ -Mary Ann O'Roark, an interview with Anne Lamott, reprinted from Clarity magazine.

The fact is, Jesus talks more about money than almost any other subject in the bible next to ministering to others in need. He knows its “pull” on us. He knows its worth. He knows our need to get a hold of it so it doesn't get hold of us.

Jesus teaches us that money is a tool to use to reap Kingdom benefits. A tool to use as any of the other gifts we've been given for the whole making of the world.

You see in Jesus the lost are found—all of us. Some are lost in the poverty of not having enough of the right stuff and the rest of us are lost in the poverty of having far too much—so much that our distraction with the constant care of things or pursuit of more causes us to lose our lives. But there is a way out---our I should say “in.”

Life in Christ. Specifically life in Christ is the finding of gospel life.

As theologian Walter Bruggemann says on the front of our stewardship insert today:

“Gospel life is not primarily life beyond death in any conventional sense. Nor is it some spiritual private realm. Rather it concerns the restoration to full power and full function the total life of the historical community.

Resurrection is personal in that individuals are rehabilitated, as is clear in the ministry of Jesus. But resurrection is also public because it concerns the restoration and transformation of public institutions for the sake of human well being.... The risen ones are empowered:

- *To speak a new language*
- *To sing a new song*
- *To have a fresh picture of self*
- *To value brothers and sisters in new ways*
- *To discern and act upon public issues in fresh ways*
- *To know the good news of God in ways that matter.*

Where ever Jesus goes he is apart of God's restoration, rehabilitation and whole making. How could it be otherwise? Because he

has restored and rehabilitated us-- How could we his disciples be about anything else?

His ministry is ours. James makes it clear: Be not only hearers but DOERS of the word. Or there is no fruit of faith at work in us.

In our culture, money is the bottom line. Everything is organized around making and spending money. That is how we make our living. And so the ways in which we use our money speak plainly about what we really value.

We may SAY we value a world in which there is enough for everyone, where there is peace, where there is no longer hunger, or injustice—but whether or not that is true is told plainly in our income tax report, in our shopping habits, in our decisions about how we spend our dollars, and in our decisions about what we give away.

Kingdom values are about sharing. Kingdom values are about serving. Kingdom values are about loving our neighbor as ourselves. Life in the kingdom —gospel life—is about feeling that immeasurable gratitude—that indescribable joy of God’s love and sacrifice and constancy for us.

I’m not talking about a reward: do this and God will give you a brownie. I’m talking about what life, the way God designed it to be, is about. It’s a discovery!! Like finding a desired gift under the Christmas tree as a little child. Have you discovered it? It’s like WOW!

It’s about that deep spiritual satisfaction that comes in living our lives governed by his Way of being in the world.

Because nothing else fills us up with such contentment, with such satisfaction or peace than his Way—because it is God’s way for living.

It’s like the smell of fresh bread! Can you smell it? I’ve been savoring it all morning! (*Ask Shirley to bring the bread up for Communion and move to the communion table. Place loaf on the big bread plate.*) There is a sense of well-being, an all-will-be-well, GOD WITH US in the aroma of freshly baked bread— A sense of the rich blessedness of life that nothing else can give.

Thank you Shirley. Thank you also for the juice on the table this morning, Shirley pressed the juice for communion as well—a laborious process—a labor of love for Shirley who was delighted to be asked to do it for us--from the sweet, Concord grapes in her yard: the fruit of faith at work in her life! Gospel life of serving and sharing.

How many years Shirley did you serve meals on wheels and coordinate the meals on wheels volunteers? And how many years have you served as our RSVP site coordinator? And how many times have we enjoyed your and Wayne’s hospitality? Fishing, eating, fellowshiping? Celebrating the goodness of life in Christian community?

When we come to the table this morning, we come gathered as God’s people called home to the celebration! The celebration of God’s salvation let loose in the world through the resurrection victory of Christ. Let us taste and see the goodness of the Lord!

As we prepare to come to the Feast of Thanksgiving, I invite you to take a few moments to prepare your gifts—your financial commitments for 2007. Many of you will have brought your completed estimate of giving cards with you, but if you haven’t had that opportunity we will pause right now for this purpose. (Sit down.)

Please fold your estimate of giving in half and bring it with you when you come forward to receive communion.

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