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Genesis 1: 31
2 Corinthians 9:8
John 2: 9 – 10

Dessert First! Thinking About Money¹

Who was it who said you don't "raise" kids.

You "raise" carrots. You "raise" beets. You don't "raise" kids.

So what do you do with kids if you don't "raise" them?

You finance them.²

Steve Clapp in his *Guilt-Free Look at Money and the Spiritual Life: Cell Phones, Dessert and Faith* shares a delightful story about a church member named Lucille.

He shares, ".....Lucille...always ate her desert before the rest of her meal. Whenever we had a potluck at church, we would see Lucille go to the dessert table and make her selection before going through the main line for an entree, vegetables, fruit Jell-O and salad. She would proceed to eat the dessert before anything else.

She shared her philosophy:

First, she believed in eating desert before the rest of her meal because, as she said, *'When you get to being seventy-eight years old like I am, you fill up quickly. I always want to have dessert, so I just eat it first.'*

Second, she also believed in giving 10% of her money to God through the church before she spent on anything else. She put it this way, 'I don't have a lot of money, just Social Security and a small pension, so it's easy to spend it all and have nothing left for God.

What I've discovered in life is that when I really put God first, I end up having enough for everything else that I need.

In fact, I'm able to save a little bit of money each month.putting (God) first causes everything else to work better.'

Like eating dessert first!

Lucille's philosophy seems upside down for our times. She ate dessert first and she gave first to God. We feel like we should eat the nutritious foods first and then consider a small portion of dessert if we still have room.

We also tend to use our resources of money, time, and talent to meet our own needs first and then give to the church or other charitable causes from what we have left.....

But Lucille's philosophy is very consistent with the biblical message. When we accurately perceive the incredible blessings that God has given us, our hearts overflow with gratitude. We discover that putting God first makes everything else work out right.

(Because) with Christ alive in our hearts, we embrace the blessings of life, including dessert. Our motivation for giving is rooted in gratitude and thanksgiving rather than in guilt and obligation."³

By putting God first we rely on God's grace and unconditional love for us ---which frees us from guilt, and shame. We recognize how God love for us puts us first! The result is the gift of joy that comes with a satisfaction and fulfillment in life that, as Lucille demonstrates, is the freedom to eat dessert first!

Let us take a few moments to consider how God puts us first:

What are some of the blessings of life for those of us in this congregation that are with us every single day of our lives?

- Food—we have food every day. Most of us have three or four meals a day.

¹ This first of a five part series of stewardship messages are indebted to the book *Cell Phones, Desert and Faith*, by Steve Clapp written for the Dessert First Stewardship campaign resources.

² Homiletics Illustrations.

³ Steve Clapp, *Cell Phones, Dessert and Faith*, p. 11-13

- Homes—we own our own homes and these homes have indoor plumbing, heating and cooling, power and light, windows and doors, insulation in the walls, furniture to sit on, appliances to clean our clothes and cook our meals and preserve our food.
- Yards—gardens—we enjoy green space. With trees and shrubbery and flowers.
- Animals: we may have pets of various kinds to keep us company—and the birds come to our yards, or butterflies, dragonflies and the like.
- Water. We have water at our fingertips—to drink, to wash with, to clean our homes and possessions, to grow our green yards. We have pools or spas or ponds or fountains.
- Medical care—we each and everyone of us have one if not three or four different medical providers: Dentists, optometrists, medical doctors who specialize in different aspects of our health.
- Medicine. I would venture to say the majority of us have at least one if not more prescribed medications to contribute to our health and extend our life.
- We have clothes for all seasons and occasions.
- We have transportation—personal, public and paid for that can take us to where ever we want to go.

The list could go on, couldn't it? I realized in writing this, I would die for three things I'm blessed with: my microwave oven, my computer and my cell phone! In these fast paced days of virtual availability I can pastor anywhere, any time! I thought about making up a bumper sticker that says, "Have cell phone, will pastor!"

But we don't always think of the origin of these things as God—do we? Money is the means by which we associate having these things. Money and hard work.

That brings us back to Lucille. "Lucille's philosophy is rooted in the recognition that everything we have comes to us from God. For those of us in North America, who have a disproportionate amount of the world's resources, it's especially important to recognize that God is the true source of all that we have.

Deuteronomy 8:10-18 warns us of the danger of forgetting about God's generosity: *Do not say to yourself, 'My power and the might of my own hand have gotten me this wealth.' But remember the LORD your God, for it is he who gives you power to get wealth, so that he may confirm his covenant that he swore to your ancestors, as he is doing today.*(vs. 17-18)

Lucille recognized God as the source of everything—including the dessert that she enjoyed and the money that she shared with others. She had confidence that God would provide for her, a confidence that reminds us of Paul's words in 2 Corinthians:

And God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that by always having enough of everything, you may share abundantly in every good work (v. 8)⁴

Paul's faith illustrates for us the way in which God puts us first and how we in turn can be free to put God and others first—like eating dessert first!

Talking about money is not an easy thing for most of us. Money, like the subject of sex, makes us very uncomfortable at times. It's easy for us "to talk about the great deal we got on something, or the outrageousness of an expenditure by some celebrity... (but) we clam up fast when the conversation starts to move into what we ourselves earn, what we give to the church or other causes, and how we manage our money.

There is often a significant difference about what we say about money and we actually do what we actually do is more reflective of our true beliefs and values.

⁴ Ibid

Most of us would say we believe in putting God first in our financial decisions, but very few of us actually give or are working toward giving a full 10% of our income to the church.

Many of us say that our culture is too consumer driven and has too much excess; but that doesn't keep us from wanting more, buying more—trading up in automobiles or homes that are much larger than we need and that consume huge amounts of energy.⁵

Without help, without the church to guide us or other believers to support us we can become preoccupied with money.

“Tens of millions of us think that our lives would be happier, better, and more fulfilled if we only had a little more money and financial security.” No matter how much we earn or own, we fall prey to the belief that greater happiness is right around the corner if we only had a little bit more.”⁶

Together, over the course of the Sundays in November we are going to be thinking about money together. This week you will receive in the mail your first letter about our annual financial stewardship campaign. Enclosed with it will be this devotional, “Dessert First, Reflections on Stewardship and the Spiritual Life.” This devotional is included because money is not a problem of scarcity or excess ---at heart any problem we have with money is spiritual. Getting and staying connected to God is the key.

To conclude I have a home work assignment for you:

For two days, carry a note card with you. Divide a line down the center of the card and write Money on the left side of the card and God on the right side of the card.

Whenever you find yourself thinking about money, make a slash mark on the money side of the card.

Whenever you find yourself thinking about God, make a slash mark on the God side of the card.

See which side has the most slash marks at the end of 48 hours! And take note if this exercise helps you think more about your spirituality when making financial decisions.⁷

In conclusion, our gospel lesson reminds us of how much more joy full life is when we bring God into it—we experience what God wants to give us in the first place —the good wine of the story in which Jesus turns the water into wine was delayed—but it doesn't have to be that way. With Jesus it can be Dessert First!

So I leave you with this Dessert First incident of a wife and mother who shares:

“My husband took our young daughter to the grocery store with him. They returned with a box of sugar-laden cookies in addition to the healthful items on my carefully prepared shopping list. Noticing my glare, my husband said, “This box of cookies has one-third fewer calories than usual.”

“How do you figure?” She asked.

Her husband replied,

“We ate a third of the cookies on the way home,”

Let the people say, **“Dessert First!” Alleluia! Amen!**

⁵ Ibid p. 20

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid 24