

“FOR THE LOVE OF GOD,” A Sermon delivered by the Reverend Dr. Geoffrey G. Drutchas, St. Paul United Church of Christ, Taylor, November 13, 2022

When I was a kid, I spent tons of time with my maternal grandparents. Every Sunday without fail I spent the afternoon at their Detroit home as a part of a larger extended family gathering which not only included my own mom, Dad, and brothers but also six aunts and uncles and eight cousins. We were all there with my grandmother serving a sit-down meal for us all.

Those were wonderful times of face-to-face family reconnection. Yet those Sundays also reconnected us to a world of shared family values and beliefs. Week after week, my dear grandmother labored so hard in the kitchen to make all this happen—even preparing a half-dozen apple pies from scratch. But her talents were not strictly culinary. Combining Mary with Martha (if you know what I mean), she was also a fabulous story teller. (*Luke 10:38-42*)

When Sunday dinner was done, some of the entertaining stories she told me and my cousins came straight from the Bible. However, other stories she chose to recount were simply mythical or the stuff of legend. Indeed, in numerous instances, my grandmother’s stories were from the Old Country—specifically the borderlands of Poland and Germany where she had been born at the start of the 20th century. Sunday upon Sunday in my growing-up years, my grandmother’s story telling kept me and her other grandchildren spell-bound.

Now the famous psychologists Bruno Bettelheim and Julius E. Heuscher, who emerged from the same generation as my grandmother with birth or ancestry from the same Eastern European neck of the woods, each wrote insightful scholarly books on the value of fairy tales for children. Bettelheim gave his more popular book the very revealing title, *The Uses of Enchantment*. However, in it, Bettelheim expressly warns against stories that don’t have “happily ever after endings, which could be psychologically damaging. Young people, he insists, need to be perennially assured that everything is going to turn out okay, no matter what happens. In his opinion, only “happily ever after” endings are suitably healthy for kids. Sad and unsettling endings are not.

Fortunately my grandmother, who didn’t have a Ph.D., but finished her formal education at tenth grade, had never heard of Bruno Bettelheim and did not belong to his school of thought. For my grandmother, whom we endearingly called “Busia,” a good story was a good story, whatever its ending, happy or sad. Always frank and forthright by nature, she did not feel obliged to censor a story in order to be psychologically or politically correct. Even when my grandmother’s stories were most disturbing, even jarring, they were wonderfully memorable and usually had a moral message.

One of my grandmother's engaging Old Country stories concerned an old crone and a wizard. Not so coincidentally, it comes to my mind today as we observe, even celebrate, our annual Stewardship Sunday right here at St. Paul Church. Why? Because it's a story about stewardship, hospitality, and generosity. Can I share it with you?

One day a wizard, traveling in disguise through the countryside, knocked on the door of an old crone's cottage. The crone was baking meat pies which could be plainly smelled. Most politely, the wizard asked for something to eat. Although hardly enthusiastic about feeding a stranger, the crone did not say no. Instead, she told the disguised wizard to wait on the small bench outside her door while she prepared something for him.

Back in her kitchen, the crone quickly went to work. She rolled out some of the scraps from her earlier baking, prepared a crust, and then added a few small dollops of meat filling. As she pushed it in the oven, it looked as small as a pie could be. Yet when the time came to pull that pie out from the oven, the crone was surprised to see that it had grown enormously and looked delicious. It was too good to give away—and to a stranger no less.

Keeping the wizard waiting, the crone decided to roll out another pie with even fewer remaining scraps and scarcely any meat filling at all. But, lo and behold, the result in the oven was even bigger and better than before. Moreover, by some strange magic, the same thing happened twice more. Indeed, each pie intended for the wizard baked up larger than the last. The old crone was both amazed and frustrated by her success. In the end, pride for her pies and scorn for the bothersome stranger at her door prompted the crone to tell the wizard that nothing had turned out right. Therefore, she could feed him nothing at all.

As my grandmother told it, the wizard listened and made no complaint but was not so easily dismissed. In fact, with a few chanted words and a quick wave of his hand, he cast a fantastic spell on the crone, transforming her in an instant into the blackest and biggest of crows. As the wizard walked away, the crone-turned-crow flitted about her former cottage and all those beautifully baked pies, never to bake again. As my grandmother liked to say, she may still be aflight there—or maybe somewhere else!

Needless to say, congregation, I was never able to look at a crow in the same way. Nor was I ever able to eat a piece of my grandmother's own Saturday-baked apple pies without thinking about the sin of stinginess and greed. Unhappy ending and all, my grandmother's fairy tale taught me the importance of not withholding the best for ourselves. Generosity is most usually, if not always, the best policy.

Obviously, fairy tales are hardly biblical. Yet on this Stewardship Sunday we might note that the biblical message is not much different from the moral substance of the Old World fairy tales or fables that I heard at my grandmother's knee. Not unlike the fairy

tale of the wizard and the crone, the Bible preaches generosity. It also castigates, even condemns, stinginess and greed. (*Matthew 6:1-4*) Yet, perhaps more important still, the Bible reserves a “happily ever after” ending for those who are faithful, generous, and hospitable.

Ironically, all the wisdom that both my grandmother and the Bible have sought to impart flies in the face of so many present-day values. For the past several decades or more, our popular culture, sustained by mass media, has encouraged us to be hedonistic pleasure-seekers, putting our own wants and needs first without regard to others. The sad fruits of this selfish philosophy abound everywhere. Today, many corporate CEOs take home paychecks 411 times larger than their rank-and-file employees—and think nothing of it. America’s billionaire class is bigger than ever. Meanwhile, we all too often see folks of every other class and station in life milking without restraint from conscience resources set aside for those more truly in need. Ethics and morals are out. Greed and opportunism are in.

What is not so widely understood and appreciated today is the great biblical insight that selfish personal enrichment inevitably leads to personal spiritual impoverishment. Indeed, those who monopolize worldly goods here and now lose out in the long run on earth, as well as in heaven. Recent studies, profiling a broad swath of Americans, have found that a “Midas Syndrome” really does exist. In a striking paradox, some of the wealthiest folks across our nation, who seem to have the golden touch, report the greatest dissatisfaction with their own lives.

Obviously, not many people want to take a vow of poverty. Who doesn’t fantasize for at least a moment or two about winning the Powerball lottery with its two billion plus take? Yet being rich is not all that it is cracked up to be. A selfish wealth can impair our relationships with God and fellow human beings, leaving us lonely and isolated. Have you followed the stories of those who have hit it big with a lotto win and found themselves multi-millionaires or better? More than half the time, their great wealth becomes a curse, rather than the blessing they anticipate. Their lives end up ruined with marriages and family life in shambles and friends lost.

From our Christian perspective, wealth is only a blessing to us when we realize it is a blessing from God. God doesn’t attach strings to his blessings. But as the biblical word underscores again and again, God bestows every blessing with the expectation that we will use what we receive in unselfish ways.

In his own desire to live unselfishly, Jesus avoided undue attachment to money and material things. (*Matthew 10:10; Luke 9:3*) Following Jesus’ example, Jesus’ apostles and earliest disciples did so too, giving themselves over as much as humanly possible to the life in God’s spirit. (*Acts 2:40-47, 4:32-37*) While Jesus did not demand that his followers

embrace the extreme material poverty that he chose, he did call upon all of us to keep all money and material possessions in proper perspective and balance. In the face of someone who wanted to trick him into saying something that might get him into trouble with Roman tax collectors, Jesus declared, “Render unto Caesar what is Caesar’s and unto God what is God’s.” Underscoring its importance, his ringing pronouncement appears in three of the four gospels. (*Matthew 22:17-21; Mark 12:16-17; Luke 20:22-25*) According to Jesus, the danger begins for us when we confuse the things of Caesar or this world with the things of God and make the mistake of believing that the pursuit of worldly wealth and advancement is something godly.

Jesus has nothing against money, per se. In one parable story which he tells about various stewards, Jesus actually encourages his followers to invest prudently and profitably, albeit honestly and ethically. (*Matthew 23:14-30*) At the same time, Jesus warns us against a love of money that displaces our foremost love of God and concern for us. As Jesus puts it straight: “No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money.” (*Matthew 6:24; Luke 16:13*) This statement from Jesus later prompts the Apostle Paul to even more boldly warn that “the love of money is the root of all kinds of evil.” (*1 Timothy 6:10-12*)

Jesus also shares with his apostles and disciples the so-called Parable of the Rich Fool about a selfish, wealthy man who keeps hoarding his abundant harvest in his barns for the future only to precipitously meet death and God’s judgment. All that he hoarded is left behind with no eternal benefit or advantage. (*Luke 12:16-34*) The parable is another explicit reminder from Jesus that we can’t take any worldly accumulations with us where we’re ultimately going. Accordingly, Jesus counsels: “Do not store up riches for yourself here on earth, where moths and rust destroy, and robbers break in and steal. Instead, store up riches for yourselves in heaven, where moths and rust cannot destroy and robbers cannot break in and steal. For your heart will always be where your riches are.” (*Matthew 6:19-21*)

Truly, we become captives to money and material possessions when we prize them so highly that we are selfishly unwilling to part with them—even when there is good reason and compelling cause to do so in the face of need all around us. We can make all the excuses we want for any stinginess on our part. But God is not fooled. As our Old Testament reading from the Book of Malachi makes clear, God sees right through our pretenses and rationalizations every time. (*Malachi 3:1-1, 7-12*) Since God always knows what’s going on with us, we need to be honest with ourselves about how we use and share the resources that God puts at our disposal. We need to be just as gracious and generous as we profess to be.

In the gospel according to Mark and Luke, a widow receives a heart-felt commendation from Jesus for merely placing two copper coins in the coffers of the Great Jerusalem Temple. (*Mark 12:42-43; Luke 21:2-3*) Why such high praise for so little? Because this widow, who is very poor, is being as generous as she can, trusting that God will continue to bless her materially and spiritually. In other words, she is doing her faithful best.

This gospel episode underscores that true generosity is always proportional to our means and usually reflects the depths of our faith in God. Does Jesus have cause to praise us at offering times in church, as well as other times in our daily lives? Given the means and resources at our own disposal, are we giving our best? Whom or what do we really worship in daily life—God or some idol which has instead become our ultimate concern? These are soul-searching questions that we need to ask ourselves if we want to be counted among God’s true servants and stewards and Christ’s faithful disciples.

God’s kingdom will ultimately prevail no matter how generous or stingy we are. No doubt Christ’s church will also survive, here or abroad. Yet what we give and what we withhold speaks volumes about our faithfulness and commitment to God’s kingdom and Christ’s living body. Jesus, who was a master psychologist of human nature, spoke divine truth when he quite simply and succinctly observed: “Where your treasure is, there will your heart be.” (*Luke 12:34; Matthew 6:21*)

As men and women who gather each week to proclaim Jesus Christ as our savior, let us make sure that our treasure and heart are in the right place. May we also affirm that generosity rather than stinginess, is God’s way and our way. Given the actual means and resources at our disposal, it may not be possible to do everything that we want for God and others. Yet for the love of God, let’s always do our best. **Amen.**