

Gratitude, Generosity and Justice

Sermon Reprint by Rev. Dr. Therese (Tess) Baumberger
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This year, through these sermons we are exploring the theme of virtues and values for our times. Financially speaking, our times are difficult. Unemployment is way up and has affected some members of this church and many in the wider community. Those of us living on retirement savings have seen the balance plummet and our monthly incomes deteriorate. We may feel scared about money, and see it is scarce in our lives. We may be struggling with a sense of loss – of money and even of power.

Therefore, it may seem like an odd time to talk about the three virtues listed in today's sermon title - gratitude, generosity, and justice. For one thing, it's hard to find gratitude when times are difficult. For another, it's hard to be generous when the financial future seems so uncertain. And finally, what does justice have to do with gratitude or generosity anyway?

Today I would like to take you on a journey through my life experiences as they touch on these three virtues. By the end, I hope you will understand why they seem related to me. Moreover I hope to share how I try to live these three virtues out in my life, through a spiritual practice that is joyful struggle.

My journey around gratitude, generosity, and justice began in my childhood. It never occurred to me, growing up, that some might consider my family to be poor. In part, this was because my parents grew up during the Great Depression and knew the real meaning of that word. My dad grew

up on a farm and so his family usually had enough food. My mom, however, grew up in town and remembers being cold and going hungry as a child.

In contrast, my siblings and I always had plenty to eat and decent clothes. Sure, the clothes were hand-me-downs but they were warm and in good repair. We had a nice house with indoor plumbing and running water, the first house my parents lived in together that had those luxuries.

I never thought of us as poor because we had two big gardens. We had chickens, ducks, geese, cows, pigs, dogs, cats and even horses. Every summer Dad would bring in armfuls of wild flowers from our pasture. We had asparagus that grew wild in our ditches and chokecherry bushes and crabapple trees that provided delicious preserves throughout the year.

We had tractors and all kinds of machinery my dad never had growing up, when they farmed with horses. When I was really little we had a telephone with a party line, and a nosy neighbor who listened in when my big sister talked to her boyfriend.

I never thought of myself as poor because we had a TV. Not only that, we could sometimes afford to eat at McDonald's, and we went to see a movie in my hometown theatre every Christmastime while our parents ran errands- Santa would be there afterwards with bags of peanuts and candy.

See how rich we were? Sure, we weren't as rich as the kids whose dads were doctors or lawyers or successful businessmen, but compared to most farming families, we did well. My older sisters even went to college - the first in my family. My dad had an eighth grade education, so this was a big deal.

All these things contributed to my sense of our wealth, but what most contributed to that feeling was that we knew people who had so much

less than we did. We were well off because we had enough to give something to them.

I never thought of us as poor. My parents gave generously to our church - not just their money but their time and energy as well. Mom was a volunteer director of religious education. She also served on the altar society that cleaned the church. Dad read during mass and was a member of the Knights of Columbus, a Catholic men's charitable organization.

I never thought of myself as poor because my parents encouraged me to be generous, too. As a child I pledged to our church. I had my own box of little envelopes with my name printed on them. I'd drop my coins or maybe a whole dollar into an envelope every week, seal it and put it into the collection basket. I felt big and important because I was making a difference.

So you see, it never occurred to me to think of my family as poor – at least, not until I went to Smith College. There I met young women who considered themselves middle class, just like I did, but whose parents made more money than I dreamed possible. I didn't think people really were that rich, that this was just happened in the movies. There I met women whose parents sent the family limousine to pick them up for the holidays, and who wore \$200 shoes - more than my whole annual clothes budget.

At that point, I began to think of myself as poor, and stopped giving to charity. Why should I give when others had so much more? Shouldn't I hold onto the little I had? I was poor. I didn't have enough. How could I give? I now recognize my sense of entitlement as an early symptom of *affluenzia*, a disease characterized by an unnatural focus on what others have that you don't have, a desire to have those things, and dissatisfaction with all you do possess.

A few years later I met, lived with, and then married an engineer. We had enough even for me to realize we could give to charity. I convinced him to give away a certain amount every month. It was a new concept to him because he hadn't grown up in any church. Since he was the major money-maker, he set the limit and so the sum we gave away was small. We still went on expensive vacations, ate out frequently, and lived lives of luxury.

As my affluenza progressed, I became a better consumer. Being a good consumer means acquiring more and more stuff. You discover that you "need" things you never knew existed. At that point, even my giving to charity was consumeristic. It bought me freedom from guilt. I felt okay walking past homeless people because, hey, I sent regular checks to Habitat for Humanity.

Eventually I found my first Unitarian Universalist church and became a member a few months later. This means I signed the membership book and pledged to give as my parents had, of my time, talent and treasure. At the time of first stewardship drive I talked with my partner about how much to give. He was the only wage earner at the time because I was home with our toddler. He said no more than \$35 per month. That's what I pledged.

When I look at the history of giving to my church, I see a progression in my reasoning that researchers say is quite common. That is, people new to giving to churches may adopt a somewhat consumeristic attitude. My first pledges were to support programs that benefited my son and me, rather than for what the congregation did for others. To me this speaks to how strongly consumerism brainwashes us. It's not about blame or shame. It's just a fact that consumerism can show up even here.

Then folks at my new church, including the minister, began to talk about the spirituality and ethics of money. That's where I first heard the word "affluenzia," and learned about its symptoms, causes, and progression. They talked about giving generously to charities and to church as a way of being counter-cultural. Hey, I liked that notion! They presented giving as a way of swimming against the tide of self-centered consumerism in our society.

To my dismay at the time, they also talked about tithing, which is giving away ten percent of your income. They said it is a spiritual practice and a way of living the virtue of generosity. They said tithing could deepen one's faith, and develop one's spirit. I don't know about you, but when I first heard about tithing I was giving my church much less than ten percent of my income.

This is not uncommon. At that time, my first church had what's known as a culture of scarcity. The congregation saw its resources as limited, and saw itself as never having enough. In churches, this sort of culture can become a self-fulfilling prophecy. This is because people who tend to sign up to run stewardship campaigns are often from the minority of people who are motivated to give more by worry and fear about scarcity.

What motivates the majority of people in churches to up their giving is a sense of contributing to something larger, to an exciting vision or outreach to the community. For this majority, fearful talk about money actually depresses their giving. In other words, expecting scarcity can lead well-intentioned church leaders, unconsciously, to cultivate scarcity. What can help is showing how financial resources are one means to accomplish your mission to your members and beyond.

Anyway, back to my story. Like many when they first encounter

the idea of tithing, I was shocked. It sounded too much like "those other churches" where ministers ask congregants to "dig deep" and then siphon off the money to line their own pockets. Of course, I knew my minister wouldn't do this. I trusted him. But I still had to contend with the "I'm poor" tape playing in my head alongside the "I deserve more, more, more!" tape. I felt scared and angry and resisted the whole idea. Mentally, I dug in my heels. No tithing for me!

But then I started hearing about tithing from other sources. The year my marriage ended, my mom gave me the book "Simple Abundance" - a book of daily meditations and exercises. One exercise in the book is to write down five things for which you're grateful every day. This is an exercise in recognizing your wealth! Simply practicing the virtue of gratitude in this way started to cure me of my affluenzia. It helped me change my tapes from "I'm poor" back to "I have so much."

The author of Simple Abundance writes that one way to live abundantly is to give it away. Money, that is. She is one of many people (along with National Public Radio's finance guru Michelle Singletary) to recommend tithing. She says that when you give away ten percent of your income with love, joy, and generosity rooted in gratitude, it draws more abundance into your life. It's one of the habits of highly effective people AND churches. Many churches give away ten percent of their budgets to social justice and outreach ministries. Isn't that cool?

What I read about tithing is that when you trust that you'll have enough, money will show up from unexpected sources. Things were hard for me that year. I was going through a divorce, looking for work, and contemplating a career change that meant more graduate school. My son and I were living below the poverty line. However, I figured it was worth a try. I

pledged ten percent of my adjusted gross income to my church that year, as an act of faith.

And to my surprise, money did come in from unexpected sources. A kind woman in my congregation offered to sublet her coop apartment to me, at a third of the rent I had been paying. I had enough, and never found it hard to pay my pledge that year.

Of course, I could not afford to go out to eat as often as before - so I ate at home. I could not afford new clothes - so I bought used ones. I'm still a thrift shop junkie - reduce! Reuse! Recycle! I certainly could not afford expensive vacations, so I went on cheap ones. Cutting back didn't really matter. What mattered more to me was spending according to my values. I felt rich again, because I had enough to give generously to causes that mattered deeply to me.

The book "Simple Abundance" had a big impact on my life - it steered me towards seminary as I recognized the need to use my gifts to bless the world by following my dream of being a minister. Part of living abundantly is using all our gifts to their best advantage! In seminary I began to learn more about economic justice, and felt a call to work with homeless people.

Eventually I found an opportunity to do just that, and volunteered a couple hours a week as a chaplain in a homeless day shelter. Last fall I talked a bit about this experience and how it further changed my attitude toward money and possessions. It was richly rewarding spiritually and emotionally.

What happened in my heart was that I became "converted to the poor" as liberation theologian Gustav Gutierrez puts it. I began to see the world through their eyes and realized how wealthy I was. Though I was

living below the poverty line once again, knowing people who had so much less helped me realize that I was in fact quite rich.

Compared to most of the people in the world now, and compared to most people throughout history, I was wealthy. Did you know that if you have a roof over your head, a bed to sleep in, a refrigerator to keep your food in and a closet to keep your clothes in, you're better off than 75% of the world?

Even below the poverty line, I had a home with several rooms, indoor plumbing, hot and cold running water, a stove, a microwave, a blender, a food processor, a TV and a VCR, a computer with a printer and a private phone line! I had shelves full of books and a terrific education. My son and I were healthy and had health insurance and good medical care. I had so much most people in our world will never have.

My attitude toward giving changed again. It became less about my personal spiritual practice and sense of abundance. Instead, giving became more connected with my sense of justice. I began to see giving as a way of spreading the wealth around a bit, a means of "restorative justice."

I learned that tithing is a practice with deep roots in the Jewish tradition, which sees it as a justice issue. In ancient times, when Jewish people were agricultural, religious law required farmers to set aside ten percent of the harvest for widows and orphans who had no other source of support. Tithing in ancient Israel upheld all in the community, so that no one fell.

As the virtues of gratitude and generosity began to revolve around justice in my mind, I thought back to the lessons I'd learned about abundant living. My questions became, "Where could I give my money so that it would have the most effect?" and "Where would it make the most

difference in the world?"

The answer for my monetary gifts turned out to be the same as for my gifts of talent and passion - I decided to give generously mainly to Unitarian Universalist congregations and causes. Why? To my mind, it's because here I get the biggest bang for my buck. Here we're in the "business" of cultivating people who are grateful for their abundance, and generously committed to justice.

It turns out that my journey from generosity rooted in a personal sense of spirituality to a generosity geared toward justice is common in people across religious traditions. It is also part and parcel of our faith. We have always believed that all people have the potential to be good. Based on this belief, Unitarian Universalists have always worked to build a world in which each and every person can nurture their goodness.

In the past this justice commitment led our people to work to establish public schools and libraries, to oppose slavery, to fight for women's suffrage, to found the Red Cross, to work for prison and the mental health reforms. Today, our belief in the inherent worth and dignity of every person continues to lead us to work for justice.

I am a Unitarian Universalist minister, and I give most of my tithe to our congregations and causes, because I feel it's a smart investment in social change. If our churches and programs are doing things right, they are growing a generous passion for justice in the hearts of good people.

Tithing for me is a spiritual practice of generosity rooted in gratitude. It is also a means for furthering the cause of justice. I'll be honest - tithing is sometimes a struggle. There were times in seminary when I had to cut my pledge back to \$50 a month. But tithing is meant to be a struggle. Like any good spiritual practice it stretches you past your usual comfort

zone. The other true thing is that tithing is a source of joy and meaning for me. It is a joyful struggle rooted in gratitude for life's abundant blessings.

My hope for you is that even in these hard times, you may cultivate a sense of gratitude for any abundance you enjoy. May that gratitude help you find ways generously to live out the potential of that abundance in the world. I believe that this is the just thing to do with one's abundance, to share it.

Like me when I first heard about tithing and the spirituality of money, you may feel yourself mentally and emotionally digging in your heels right now. You may be flashing back to other ministers asking you to dig deep. I grok that. You may be feeling angry and scared. I understand those feelings and encourage you both to express and to work through them as best you can.

When the time comes to pledge to our stewardship campaign (in a couple months), I invite you to consider joining me in giving a percentage of your income to the life and work of this church. It's possible to ease into it rather than leaping like I did. Many people start out with 2 percent, and increase it by a percentage point each year until it feels really good – like your giving is making a positive difference in the ministry of this church, that it may better serve the world in a spirit of justice. May it be so.