

Scripture Matthew 6: 19-24

Week 2: "Looking In"

Quote from It's a Wonderful Life:

"You've been given a great gift, George: a chance to see what the world would be like without you. ... Strange, isn't it? Each man's life touches so many other lives, and when he isn't around, he leaves an awful hole, doesn't he?"

— The angel Clarence Odbody

In the movie "It's a wonderful life" George Bailey gets an amazing gift. He gets to see what the world would have been like without him in it. He suddenly realizes the impact he has made. He is reminded that his brother wouldn't be alive today if he hadn't saved him from slipping under the ice when they were kids. He realizes people would be homeless if he hadn't helped them the way he did. He sees people in depression because he hadn't been there to help them through a rough time. He discovers that the evil tyrant he battles in his everyday compassionate life would rule the town and the devastation would be catastrophic.

I found it powerful to watch this movie with intention. In a few minutes I am going to invite you to pause for a moment - take a break and think through your life - ponder moments when you have been there for someone, times you have lent a helping hand, something you might have done that you have forgotten. I have some things in my office that are very sentimental. Others might look at them and wonder why I have them in my office. Why I hold them so dearly. I am not going to explain them but I have put some of those things on the table today because as I stopped and pondered and decided to invite you to ponder I was reminded that I just maybe I have done some good in the world, I have touched some lives. It might surprise you but sometimes we as clergy wonder if we have ever made any sort of difference. Like George Bailey we want to help others, it is at the core of who we are but in the rush of life and in the face of anxiety about budgets and getting things done we often forget and recognize that others quickly forget too. As I have walked with a few friends heading into retirement I know they wondered "was it worth it all? Did I ever make a difference?" Did I ever actually comfort a heart? Did I ever help someone know they are loved? Did I?

We live an "incarnational" faith, that means, like Jesus, our faith is not just an idea, but it gets lived out in our actions in the world. How we integrate money and meaning can give us courageous vision for our presence and impact in the world. It is the bedrock for how we "spend" our assets—time, energy, and money—so that we approach the life we have left with

attentiveness and intentionality to making it a “wonder-full” life. When our faith life becomes consumed with dread we are missing God’s call on our life.

Today’s scripture comes in the midst of the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus is helping us see the juxtaposition of “what the world says is valuable” and “what is really worth a lot.” Jesus keeps inviting us to see that it is the motivation and “state of the heart” that is the key to righteousness—right living. “Storing up treasures in heaven” is to concentrate on the riches that come with the outpouring of right relationship, love, grace, generosity. These things are “uncorruptible” rather than the accumulation of things that can become “gods” in and of themselves. How we “spend” our gifts (“treasures” of time, energy, money) indicates what we love, what we value, how we want to impact the world. How do we become more courageous, intentional, and visionary about how we serve through our ‘expenditures?’ Matt Skinner wrote

“The true value of monetary wealth, lies not in its power to accumulate possessions in pursuit of power and comfort. Wealth enables generosity, and a generous heart has its sights set on God. Jesus’ statement in verse 21 works in two ways. First, our use of wealth displays where our hearts reside. The uses to which we put money identify what our innermost selves care for most deeply. Second, our hearts can be made to follow where our treasure goes. When we invest in certain charitable causes and people, our hearts will expand to care for them more deeply. This means that a person need not wait until she or he can muster enough heartfelt concern for the needy before writing a check. Giving a gift, putting money toward uses that promote God’s vision of righteousness, may help a heart receive a taste of what God desires for the world.”¹

This week are called to look at our lives, our faith and even our finances with compassion, curiosity, and creativity. If you have a fear or dread or anxiety around money these practises are for you. These attributes are ones that can help us move from fear and shame to a healthy way of dealing with our money issues. I know this intimately and there have been some conversations I have been in around money this week that honestly have been heartbreaking. It just happens that this is the subject at hand in my life and the life of others more often than any of us would like. It also makes me realize how wise it would be for us to spend some time in serious spiritual practice around our finances. When we shift our internal “speak” from judgement to curiosity, this actually increases the other two attributes: we have more compassion for our past and present money issues and more creativity as we imagine changing those things that hold us captive to fear. Often our habits around money also influence how we spend our other treasures of time and talent and service.

Today’s subject is Looking in. I don’t have a habit of retail therapy but many do, if this is you you might take some time to ask yourself “I wonder why I have this habit of ‘retail therapy’ when I get depressed?” When you ask this you might compassionately uncover a false belief about the power of “things” to make us feel secure (“earthly treasures”). And then when we go further to ask “I wonder what my faith has to say about what really offers the security I desire?” What if

¹ https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=252

you were to creatively imagine a spiritual practice such as making a gratitude list instead of going shopping the next time this urge arises. This becomes part of our courageous vision we are intentionally naming in order to bring our money practices into the realm of spiritual practice. Marcia Mcfee said when I feel afraid (for instance, before doing the monthly bills), I have been practicing starting my sentences with “I wonder” for some time now and I can say that this curiosity practice has helped me tremendously (“I wonder how I will creatively solve the increased cash flow demands this month!”). It begins to put me in a state of imagining rather than dreading. Just like all practices, it takes a while to retrain the brain, but with repetition, it begins to shift my attitude about bill-paying.

For me the question might be different it might be “I wonder why I give so freely of my time and talents, why am I in a place of giving beyond my capacity?” I wonder why I feel the need to be the one to solve it all, what does that do for myself, and what does that do for others? I spent a little bit of time on that question this week but I realized on Friday when I found myself falling back into this unhealthy practice that I have a lot more work to do. Most of the time I love to give and help and share but ever so often a resentment bug flies in and that is when I know it is my responsibility to set the fly trap to get rid of the resentment not someone else's. That is often the quality of a minister or a care-giver, the expectations are high that one will give beyond capacity but for you care-givers out there when the giving is no longer life-giving its time to look in and remember the message of Jesus is “I came that all might have life abundantly” not just the others.

“Looking in” requires a deepening self-awareness. Becoming more in tune with what feels truly life-giving and what feels dread-producing will give us good clues about what our hearts desire for the long-haul and therefore, how we “spend” our time and money—what “treasures” we pursue. Marcia McFee stated the exercise in the *Integrating Money and Meaning* book that affected her the most was imagining a limited time left in her life and thinking about what she would change about “spending habits” (time and money) with the time she has left. Kulyk writes *“Looking death squarely in the face is one of the oldest spiritual practices. Some of the monastic mothers and fathers would sit in caves staring at skulls, contemplating the reality of death. I’m not suggesting we need to take up that practice exactly, but there may be something in such contemplation that is comforting—to know we are not alone on our journey but part of a larger reality. It also can help us focus on our heart center and what truly matters for the time we have left.” (91)*

McFee wrote “Getting to see and witness how I could affect the world for the good by offering my resources (time, talent, money, energy) more generously was high on the list. It made me want to spend more on mission and volunteer work and support organizations who are affecting things I care about in the world. I would spend more time with friends around the table, offering beautiful food and conversation that buoys hope in the communities of which I am a part. I would not choose to allocate my time (no matter how profitable monetarily) to projects that zap me of the ability to stop and smell the roses on a regular basis. And when I name these things out loud, I am so aware of my privilege—my ability to choose how I want to make money.

And it makes me want to work for similar life-giving choices for all people. Which brings me full circle to the treasure of giving, of not taking so much in this world that others cannot have abundance. "Live simply so that others may simply live," as the saying attributed to Ghandi goes.

I am going to offer us a moment now to ponder on these questions. You have a handout in your bulletin that asks the questions. I invite you to take a moment to reflect and answer.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ItfOXBNrvD8>

What would the world be like if you never existed? Remember the story of George Bailey. (If you are feeling depressed these days and your immediate response is 'It would be better off' do you best to think beyond that and consider where have you offered hope and light and love and grace? Maybe today, maybe not but at some point in your life you have.

What if I only had 5-10 years to live? (How would I change my life? Would it stay the same? What choices would I make? In what direction would I turn? What are the money Implications of my decisions?)

What if I only had a year? (would it be the same?)

What if there was only today?

I think these practices are amazingly good and they can be very difficult. Be gentle with yourself find, compassion, creativity and curiosity. If you know you are not gentle with others in this subject matter please try to be. "I have come that they might have life abundantly" Jesus said.

If you would like to continue to pursue a deepening of these practices please join us on Tuesday night. I would like you to please RSVP if you are coming so I know how many to expect.

Amen.