

Squamish United Church
Rev. Karen Millard
Stewardship series week 3
It's a Wonderful Life

November 17, 2019

Scripture
1 Timothy 6:17-19

Courageous Vision

Quote from It's a Wonderful Life:

"Mr. Potter, what makes you such a hard-skulled character? You have no family, no children. You can't begin to spend all the money you've got."

— Peter Bailey to Mr. Potter

The difference between the Baileys and the Potters comes both in the inner and outer worlds. The questions they raise for us personally is do we reap love and generosity or bitterness and resentment? As we sit in their characters they force us to ask if the outer manifestations of our money practices align with our courageous vision. Are we creating the impact for which we hope or at least moving in that direction? When our practices—no matter how incremental or seemingly simple—are serving the vision, we live with a sense of wholeheartedness and wonder that energizes us, those around us, and the world. We “truly live.”

I want to talk about courageous vision today. Last week we reflected on the question. How would I live and how would I spend or give of my money if I knew I only had a short time left in this world. We asked if we would live differently. Today the good news is you are still here and we are still engaging with the holy longing to create an abundant life for us and others. This week as we ponder how would we live differently it gives us opportunity to create a courageous vision for our lives. You will be more fully alive (which Jesus says he came to show us the way to do) if your heart centre is aligned with your giving and living centre. It can be hard to live into new direction, into new ways of approaching life and finances - the conversation alone stunts a lot of us. When ideas are considered the first responses are usually why it won't work. But this is a moment for courage.

During the Roman Empire (the time of the Letter to Timothy), many persons who acquired material wealth may have done so by cooperating with the Roman authorities and therefore contributing to the systemic oppression of the poor. Christians were to be a counter-cultural movement concerned with a more equitable distribution of resources and care of those who needed help the most. But this did not mean that those who had money could not help the movement. Benefactors were essential to the spread of Christianity and support of teachers and apostles. Money, when coupled with alignment of values and vision for a more just world, could result in the kind of generosity that gives life not only to the movement, but to the giver.

Christian A. Eberhart wrote

“Material wealth can get in the way of putting one’s trust in God, and it can be a hindrance to following Jesus (Mark 10:17-22). Yet many of the church ministries and services depend on financial resources of those who are willing to share them. Therefore, those who have riches ‘are to do good, to be rich in good works, generous, and ready to share, thus storing up for themselves the treasure of a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of the life that really is life’ (1 Timothy 6:18-19).” ([Reference link](#))

When we look at how and what we spend our wealth on we can see who we are ultimately looking out for? How do we balance our need to care for our own well-being and also look out for the bigger picture? What is “prosperity” really? How can we redefine it? *Prosperare* is the Latin root that meant literally, “to cause to succeed” or “to render happy.” “Happiness” and “success” are things that are not just based in money (although our 21st century world might allude that they are), but rather can be translated into a state of well-being that ultimately depends on our interconnectedness with the well-being of others. Additionally, the Old Latin roots point to “according to one’s hopes” (*Pro* = “for” and *spes* = “hope”). For what do we hope? What we hope for, what we value, what we build, is where we will put our resources. And “resources” must also be seen in terms of the non-monetary gifts we can give, especially because for many, money barely covers the costs of keeping ourselves in food and shelter.

Money and the church has a sketchy history. The accumulation of wealth by the church for purposes unrelated to alleviating the suffering of the poorest among us is unfortunately a prevalent theme. The use of guilt and coercion to get money from people or the misuse of funds has known no boundaries of tradition or denomination. No wonder we don’t like to talk about it. In the 19th and 20th century, part of the Christian community began to preach what is called a “prosperity gospel” or the “health and wealth gospel.” This theological view equates poverty and sickness with sin and ignores systemic oppression with the idea that anyone should be able to prosper if they are “good enough” or work “hard enough.” Some televangelists used the idea of one’s financial donations being returned “seven-fold” as con-games that preyed on the emotions of those who were experiencing financial instability. There was a recent devastating incident of this in the Philippines. When a pastor claimed if people gave donations they would come back in wealth and many people already in poverty gave in desperate hope and have lost everything.

Liberation theology sits more comfortable with me as I read the scriptures. It speaks of God’s “preferential option for the poor.” Liberation theology focusses on the theme scripture of this series. “I have come that they may have life abundantly.” It is this sort of missional, justice oriented theology that brought me to the United Church in the first place. It is founded in the fact that my faith life should impact how I live and treat others and all of creation. God is always on the side of the vulnerable. God desires for us to participate in the bringing of the kingdom of God on earth so that all might flourish. God calls us to speak up for the vulnerable communities and see all as equal in God’s eyes. That is why as a church we find ourselves doing what we can to assist children that need care until their adults get home from work, that is why we offer space to organizations like NA and AA, that is why we hold the extreme weather shelter in the winter

months. Our world in full of injustice. Unjust environmental practices that effect the most vulnerable communities. There are Canadians that do not have clean drinking water. How is that even possible? We continue to see a racial divide in our prison systems. How do we face those inequities as people of faith. How do we treat those that some might think are lower or less than we are? Do we look at a persons financial status, employment or skin colour and think less of them? Or do we see them with God's eyes fully human, fully alive and equally loved?

Several years ago Squamish United Church started to ask a very similar question to the one we having been asking of ourselves in the last week. They found themselves asking where are we going to be in five years? They considered that if they stayed the same they likely would die a slow death maybe not in five but maybe in ten or if they were lucky they could stretch it out to twenty. And so they began to set their courageous vision. They looked at what they had and who they wanted to be and they did their very best to align those values. They considered just giving in and letting things ride, they considered moving out, selling property and making a whole lot of money for a 'nest egg,' but they didn't know what the point of that was if they were dying. And so they stepped out in courageous faith. They donated the land to Sea to Sky Community Services, they kept this portion of land and they gave the largest donation of anyone they gave them the possibility to build Centrepoint. Why? Squamish United Church wanted to align their mission and courageous vision with their life with their assets. They wanted to live more abundantly and offer abundant life to others.

They took a tiny mustard seed grain of faith and planted it with the hope that they would become a church for the community of Squamish. With the hope that they could offer opportunity for mission, and connect outside their current capacity. They had a desire to become church for young families again, They wanted to care for community in a deeper way, they wanted that mustard seed of faith to grow into a tree thats roots ran deep in the community in a way that lives were touched, in a way that people could find shelter here, warmth, love, generosity and compassion. Folks when I think about this I realize that we are living into our courageous vision. It is no longer just a dream we are acting it out. Can you believe that? Stop and look and see.

“Generosity” and “hospitality” can be seen in so many practices that don't rely solely on our ability to give money. So whether we are able to be monetary benefactors or whether our benevolence comes in time and effort, when we are “rich in awareness” of how our everyday practices affect others, we can be faithful stewards of how we “spend” our assets.

I find the assessment of the “four key money activities” in *Integrating Money and Meaning* very helpful: earning, giving, spending, and storing. McFee wrote As I went through my own assessment in these four categories, I felt a relief at having a way to see these areas in the light of the courageous vision I had begun to develop. The relief had to do with a way of tracking my money practices that helps me make decisions based on alignment with my goals of working for a “greater good.” We are so bombarded with messages of what we need “right now” in order to feel “worth-y-ness.” So many of those messages are completely false and yet they consume us.

As I personally read through the book one of the spiritual practices that struck me was to start a practice of Bill paying with an open heart. Pay your bills with compassion for yourself and not judgment. Kulyk suggests you Open you check book or bank statement or credit card statements and look at the purchases you made in the last month.

What purchases brought you joy and gratitude?

Which made you feel guilty or resentful?

Were there impulse buys you later regretted?

What resources were used in the making of these purchases?

Think about the interactions you had with the person from whom you bought those goods

Are you grateful for them? Do you feel cheated by them?

Do you feel like your purchases reflect your courageous vision? If not how will you align your purchases with your life vision?

Where are you giving? Where are you consuming?

The next step in Kulyk's books is to look at

"When you give, is it out of obligation or because it serves your courageous vision? (or life vision) What courageous visions of other people or organizations do you support? Do these visions align with your own? Does it serve the wider community? Do you give freely or with trepidation? Does it make you feel joyful or afraid? Are there strings attached to your giving?... Giving should not be confused with controlling. Be wary of giving money in order to force someone or an organization to do something specific. I'm not saying we shouldn't be well informed about where our money is going and what it's supporting. On the contrary, this is key to the giving process. But giving as part of your courageous vision is more about gratitude and the act of sharing than manipulating an outcome." (120)

Lets talk about that last part for a moment. McFee wrote "Wow. That last part addressed head-on some of the dynamics of giving I have seen in churches. As a worship consultant, I have seen churches "held hostage" for fear of the consequences of doing something different in worship that might make a particular donor upset. I've seen it stifle the spirit and effectiveness of churches who need to expand their practices in order to reach new people. In this case, it is often that the "vision" of the giver becomes more important than that of the "greater good." If you need any more evidence of how money issues are spiritual issues, this is a clear one. McFee suggests that perhaps going through a process of getting more clear about the courageous vision of your church community and then communicating that regularly is a good first step to making sure that when conflicts arise, checking our viewpoints against that vision will offer a more concrete way of drawing people into practices for the greater good." Not a bad idea, and something I think the leadership is in the process of doing.

As I thought about McFee's comments and perspectives I would say I have seen this kind of manipulated giving a lot in my many careers of working in non-profits. I have seen it a lot in churches and I have seen it in Squamish United Church. And yet let me also take a moment to say we don't experience this sort of manipulation in Squamish United Church near to the degree many others do and for that I want to say thank you. The people of Squamish United Church

who are long term members here today have given often with gratitude and thanksgiving and rarely with strings attached. I love how we have the ability to be creative in worship and explore new ways of worship and giving and offering the kingdom to our wider community and lets be honest we wouldn't have the missions and dreams we do today if the supporters of the church over the last 15 years hadn't lived into a very courageous vision. And I have learned this week that some of you have been listening in the last weeks and also have shown us your support in courageous giving ways. I want to say thank you for that. I know some of you gave out of savings and felt you gave all you can at this time and I want to acknowledge that first and foremost. We see you and we appreciate you. And because we have already seen you giving you likely won't be surprised by what I say next.

You know there has been a lot of money talk from me over the last weeks and that is not the norm for me. I would rather not talk about it but I have learned a lot in this series and have begun to take this money piece into my spiritual life as well. I encourage you to risk doing the same. You can buy this book online and although this is in no way meant to be an advertisement time (because that would be 'gross' in the midst of a sermon) It is an encouragement for you to consider looking at this book that may help you figure out where you really want your money to go so that it aligns with your courageous vision for life. If it can work for a financial planner it just might work for us.

And then there is the hard truth that at a time in the life of our congregation we have serious money concerns to address. Next week we will have a wonderful lunch that supports the Christmas dinner at First United Mission on the downtown east side. At that time we would also like you to join us in a conversation to assist discerning the next steps in our courageous vision as Squamish United Church so that we are able to keep loving and caring for one another and the broader community the way we do (and more). Yes we will ask for you to consider giving financially because that is always the first step but we will also ask you if there are ways you might be able to share with us other talents of time, gifts, abilities, resources, wisdom and more as you assist us in figuring out our courageous vision and how we might move forward with it. Maybe you have gifts to share that we don't know about or we haven't even thought of. The leadership of Squamish United Church is excited for what we have been building and creating here and we hope you are too. Every one of you is a part of a courageous vision being lived out. And so please join us next week for a conversation of dreams and visions that will continue to move us forward in ways that continue to build God's kingdom of love, grace, hope, peace and joy in this community and beyond. We need all of you to be a part of living into the dream of keeping us living abundantly for years to come. We are alive and well and thriving thanks to every one of you. We hope you feel it too. Let us live in gratitude for all that we have and align our courageous vision with God's vision for Squamish United Church, the community of Squamish and beyond.