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Give until you feel better  
Sydenham-Heritage United Church  
Sept 18, 2022  
by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on Luke 12:13-21

I think that our reading from Luke this morning is perhaps one of the least-well understood texts in the Bible. To our modern ears, the story seems almost reasonable. But to Jesus's audience of his day, the words would have been - in many respects - crazy talk.

[image: selfish]

And we will dive into that in a minute. But first, I have a question for you all. Why do people give things to other people? Think about yourself. Why do you give things to other people?

[image: families on a bicycle ride]

There are at least 3 categories of giving here. First of all, we often give things to people in our own families. Just for fun and I checked to see the cost of raising a child in Canada today. Apparently, it costs \$282,000 to raise a child to age 18. And I assume that for those of us who are parents, that \$282,000 was a gift - not a loan. That's one type of giving. Giving with no particular expectation of reciprocity. It doesn't usually even feel like giving. It's just the cost of living together and supporting a child's development. For me personally, it does not feel like the cost of raising a family. It felt like the cost of being a family. And certainly money well spent.

[image: reciprocal gift giving]

A second category of giving is reciprocal. We sometimes give gifts to people and we

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expect to get gifts back in return. And if we are honest, in many cases we expect the value of the gifts being exchanged to be comparable. Giving gifts to extended family members at Christmas time sometimes works like this, as do many office gift exchanges.

[image: giving to strangers]

And a third category of giving is giving to people we may not even know with no expectation of any return at all. And we give because .... well, why do we give to unknown people from whom we have no expectations? Why do you give to people you do not know with no expectation of any sort of return?

[descend and ask?]

[or, Larry's story?]

One reason for giving - that has been proven by science - is that giving often makes us feel better ourselves. And we get to help another person in the process. It's a win-win.

Liz Dunn has done actual research on this. "In a controlled experiment, Dunn and colleagues gave students at the University of British Columbia an envelope containing money and told them that they either (a) had to spend the money on themselves before 5 p.m. that day or (b) had to spend the money on someone else before 5 p.m. Those who gifted for others were happier than those who gifted for themselves.

In some cases, there were 5 dollars in the envelope and in other cases there were 20 dollars. The amount did not matter - the results were the same. Spending on others made people happier than spending on themselves. Ironically, when asked to predict which outcome would make one happier another group of students at the same university thought spending on themselves would make them happier than spending on others."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/the-social-self/201012/giving-really-is-better-receiving>

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Now I know what you might be thinking. That experiment does not sound very scientific. And besides, students have access to lots of free pizza. So perhaps they can be more generous.

[image: give until it hurts]

Besides we know the drill. I'm sure that all of us have heard that we need to give until it hurts. What is with this crazy talk that giving can make you feel better? What with that?

[image: massage article]

The whole idea that giving makes you feel better applies even to working adults. I found an interesting article about massage therapists called "Giving until it hurts is unethical"<sup>2</sup>. That's a very provocative title, but it literally applies to massage therapists.

Quoting from the article, "Combined studies show that the average lifespan for massage therapists currently is between three to five years, and the most common reason therapists leave the field is because they get injured or feel burnt out".

Many people who work in "helping professions" experience burnout. We are hearing more and more about nurses, PSW, and other health care workers about how burned out they have become with covid. But I had not realized that this has been a problem for massage therapist long before we could even spell covid.

Massage therapists have of course been working on their own solutions to prevent burnout. And one solution is that massage therapists have observed that sometimes - they feel better after a massage - just like their customers. Imagine that. That a massage can benefit both the customer and the therapist. The secret to both parties benefiting from a massage has to do with balance and attention.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.massagemag.com/reverse-burnout-ethically-85731/>

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“When we develop a healthy balance of giving and receiving attention, we are ‘respecting the inherent worth of all individuals.’ Giving and receiving attention not only inoculates us from feeling unwell and disconnected from others.”<sup>3</sup>

[image: Don’t give until it hurts. Give until you feel better. ... PRS]

The point is that for massage therapists, the old adage “give until it hurts” literally causes them to burnout and leave their profession. There must be a better way for them to give. And for them, the new adage “give until you feel better” is literally their path to healing. And actually, I think giving until you feel better works for everyone.

[image: coins]

So now I suppose we need to deal with the story in Luke. As I said earlier, to our modern ears the story might make sense. But to ears in Jesus’s day, it was very strange. And if we don’t understand that, then we don’t really understand it today either. For example, the story opens with, someone telling Jesus, “Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me.” By today’s standards, inheritance is shared equally unless specified otherwise. To us, the request sounds reasonable. But in Jesus’s day, for Jewish people, inheritance was not shared equally. Daughters - as we might expect - got nothing. And to maintain the image that the oldest son was special, the oldest son got twice as much as any other son. Moreover, it was the right of the oldest son to decide when and where to actually split the inheritance. So the person’s request to Jesus was completely crazy.

And Jesus’s response is hard to understand. “And Jesus said to them, ‘Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of possessions’..” But here’s what I cannot figure out. Who is Jesus calling greedy? The oldest son for not splitting the inheritance yet, or the younger son who wants what they are not actually entitled to? Who is Jesus accusing of being greedy? I honestly do not

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

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know. Deep down, I just hope that Jesus did not mean both of them! Yes, I do own a number of concordances, and I can look it up. But those concordances were written for our modern ears. I think it is actually unclear who Jesus is calling greedy in this story. And again, we do not want to imagine that both sons were being accused of being greedy because that might apply to us too.

[image: wheat]

So to clarify the situation, Jesus tells a parable. But honestly, the parable only confuses me more. In the parable a successful farmer grows more crops than he has storage for. So the farmer decides that he needs bigger barns to store the large crop. Somehow, we are led to believe that the farmer did the wrong thing, because he died before he could enjoy his bumper crop. But why does that matter. His large crop would have been inherited by his children - well, his sons anyway - and so that bounty was enjoyed. Just not by him. The farmer's larger barns would have been a gift to his family. Let's be honest. The meaning of the parable is at least unclear.

Now I'm not an idiot. I know that I am supposed to tell you that the story is about the risk of being greedy. I know that I'm supposed to tell you that the farmer should have shared his large crop. Well, he did share it. He just did it by dying and allowing inheritance laws to handle the details.

[image: gandhi]

The UCC materials want me to now insert a quote from 2 Corinthians 9:8, "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".

And now I want to share a quote from the UCC materials. "Paul was talking about meaning: an economy of meaning rooted in God's grace and abundance. It's the same

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concept that megabrands have tapped into over the last 20 years. It's not just a watch... it's a personal accessory that empowers greatness. It's not just a drink...it's rocket fuel that will turn you into a super athlete. It's not just a computer...it's a way of life and you can never have too many of these things, because the next version, the next upgrade, will enable you to do even more and make you a happier person. If you just have enough stuff, if you just surround yourself with an abundance of things, then having meaning in life is as close as your next trip to Costco or Walmart.”

This week, I found the UCC materials were really written from a place of privilege, and were intended to be spoken to people of privilege. And I perhaps should not admit this to you, but I do not actually understand the quote that I just read to you.

The assumption I think - and this applies to the story in Luke as well as the UCC materials - is that we honestly believe that having stuff is our only objective in life. And if that were true, then perhaps that paragraph would make sense to me. But does that actually apply to any of us? Do any of us actually think that the accumulation of stuff is what gives life meaning?

[image: “I would like you to know. When you see the simple things. To appreciate this life. It's not too late to learn”]

Please correct me if I'm wrong, but I think I don't care too much about stuff - at least most of the time. But I do love what stuff can do for me. Take technology, for example, something that the UCC materials seems to be opposed to:

Personally, I like what technology does for me. I don't think technology is an object of my affection per se. For me, technology is a tool, not an objective.

Quick quiz. Put your minds back to February 2020. That's when Marjorie and I came to this community. And one month later, in March 2020, covid hit us. Now. Show of hands.

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How many of you were glad that I came to Brantford with enough technology to setup and run an online church with 5 days notice (with help from our communications team of course) while our tech team worked to setup our sanctuary for online streaming? Anyone? And how many of you would have been happier if I had come to Brantford with nothing but a pencil and some paper and just thrown up my hands when covid hit? Anyone?

[image: stuff]

Stuff is not the problem. If our lives are too focused on the acquisition of stuff, maybe that is a problem. But stuff itself is not usually the problem.

My good friend and preacher Brian Buydens shared his sermon with me last week, and he claimed that the most mis-quoted text in the entire Bible is, “money is the root of all evil”. And he is correct that the quote takes it out of it’s original context to the point that it is a mis-quote. The actual quote is from 1 Timothy 6:10,

[image: for the love of money ...]

“For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, and in their eagerness to be rich some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pains.”

Money - or stuff - is not the problem. The problem is, where do we place our love? Where do we find meaning in life?

[image: selfish]

I want to return to the title of this sermon. “Let’s be selfish”. I selected that title because I thought it might be at least a bit provocative. But also, because it is actually true. I want to encourage us all to be more selfish. But if we are going to be selfish, we should do it

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properly. If something is worth doing, it's worth doing well, right?

Because I agree with the basic assertion that giving to others makes us feel better ourselves. Giving to others is a win-win. And since giving to others makes us feel better, we should be selfish by giving to others as often as we can. Because we should be selfish enough that we want to feel better ourselves by giving to others.

We all have things to give. Since we are discussing stewardship I'm sure you've thought about money. And that's important of course. But that's only one thing. I meet many people every week, and I promise you that the gift that many - if not most - people need is NOT money. Many people need a listening ear, someone who cares, someone who will spend time with them. Many people just want to be heard, to feel needed, to feel wanted, to feel included. These are all gifts, and these are the gifts it takes to build community.

I said something earlier about parenting, but I think it applies to churches too. It takes money (and other things) to raise a child. And that is true of course. We can think of that as the cost to raise a child. Or we can think of that as the cost to BE a family.

I am so happy that people are coming back into the church now and many of our programs are starting to spin up again. This church - as a community - needs many gifts to keep going. But I want to encourage us to not think like that. The gifts we need are not the cost of doing something or other. The gifts we need are the cost of being a church.

Giving is not about having stuff. It is about being who we are. Let's be selfish!

Amen.