
Let's be selfish!
Chapel in the Park United Church
September 14, 2025
by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on Luke 12:13-21

Back in the spring, someone requested a service that focused on stewardship. So today is your lucky day. And it's interesting that on the day we want to talk about stewardship, Rev Paul is not here! He did however provide this reflection. And if we want to discuss stewardship more sometime, the United Church of Canada has resources for a 5-week series. But let's start with something simpler today.

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 the audience in Jesus's day, the words would have been - in many respects - crazy talk.

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?

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 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. That's one type of giving. 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 did not feel like the cost of raising a family. It felt like the cost of being a family.

A second category of giving is reciprocal. We sometimes give gifts to people, and we expect to get gifts back in return. And if we are honest, in these 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. Office gift exchanges usually work like this.

A third category of giving is giving to people we may not even know with no expectation of any return at all. One example would be giving money to someone on the street who has their hand out. Another example would be supporting a charity that we have no other connection to.

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?

[if you are brave, ask people and let them answer!]

One reason for giving - and this has been proven by science - is that giving often makes us feel better ourselves. Giving can actually be a win-win. We help another person, and we feel better too. What's not to like?

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 had to either (a) spend the money on themselves before 5 p.m. that day or (b) 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."

Now I know what you might be thinking. That experiment does not sound very scientific.

And besides, university students have access to lots of free pizza. So perhaps they can afford to be generous.

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 us feel better? What is up with that? Is this just a very thinly veiled way to ask for money here at the church?

Let's return to the story in Luke now. As I said earlier, to our modern ears the story might make sense. But to ears in Jesus's day, it was actually very strange. And if we don't understand that, then perhaps we don't really understand it today either.

The story opens with, someone telling Jesus, "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me." By today's standards, inheritance is usually shared equally. To us, the request to Jesus 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 every other son. Moreover, it was the right of the oldest son to decide when and where to split the inheritance. So the person's request to Jesus really made no sense.

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?

And 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 the 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 very least unclear.

And of course I know what I'm supposed to say here. I've read many United Church of Canada documents about stewardship. 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.

But for us - today - we are left with a story that says that the accumulation of "stuff" is bad. What do we think of that? What do you think of that? Is "stuff" the root of all evil?

My good friend and preacher Brian Buydens shared a sermon with me once, and he claimed that the most mis-quoted text in the entire Bible is, "money is the root of all evil". And I agree with him. The actual quote is from 1 Timothy 6:10, "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 usually not the problem. The problem is, where do we place our love? Or another way to ask the question: Where do we find meaning in life? Do any of us actually believe that the purpose of life is the accumulation of "stuff"?

Stuff is usually not our 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. It's really more a question of where we place our love.

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 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 freely. Because we should be selfish enough that we want to feel better by giving to others.

We all have things to give. Since we are discussing stewardship, I'm sure you've already thought about money. Money is important of course. But that's only one thing. I've met many people. 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.

Stewardship is about all our gifts. Our time, our passion, our energy. We all have gifts and skills that someone else would appreciate. Gifts like teaching how to paint, how to crochet, or how to play guitar. We all have gifts to share.

I said something earlier about parenting, but I think it applies to churches too.

For parenting: 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.

And it's the same thing in the church. We can think of the resources we need as the cost to keep the church doors open. Or we can think of the resources we need as the cost to BE a church.

If giving makes us feel better, then let's be selfish and give graciously.

Amen.