

This morning I think most of you know that I am supposed to talk about money. I think most of you know that we have this wonderful Board of Stewardship that does a great deal of planning and thinking and then sends out a letter and makes some phone calls and then asks the preacher on this Sunday to talk about money. And if you are a visitor this morning, you have wandered in here on the very day when this annual ritual of talking about money is supposed to happen. And I would be tempted to apologize to you visitors because I am tempted to believe that my talking about money might make you uncomfortable, but I know that you know that this beautiful building and this wonderful congregation and these preachers and this music program and what you may have heard about the mission of this congregation did not just happen here on Prospect Avenue by accident, --that we were not just hatched from some cosmic egg or that somehow we all fell from the sky fully formed, we are here because for the last 100 years or so, someone talked about money and a lot of great people listened and God blessed and multiplied.

For many years in other congregations, despite being asked to talk about money I have often made a game of explaining that I really don't like to talk about money because I grew up in a family that even used a different tone of voice when they referred to money—they whispered the word in a rather shameful raspy voice. We had an aunt who had “money” and neighbors who had “money” and there were people in our church who had “money”, but we never talked about it unless the word “money” was mentioned in that tone of voice. A few years ago, I decided that I have this congenital disease known as “financiaphobia”—the fear that since “money” is supposed to be the root of all evil, if I talk about “money”, you will not like me because I might make you uncomfortable while I am making myself uncomfortable talking about “money”.

And of course that is silly. And of course you already know that the church needs money and that the only way for that to happen is for all of us to do our part, by making an annual pledge and then doing as well in our giving as we are able. It's called proportional giving—giving that reflects our blessings—some give lots and some give less, but all give proportionally.

Many of us have discovered the miracle of tithing. Some of us set aside five or ten percent of our incomes each year to give to others through the church or through hundreds of other caring institutions. Some of us have figured out that the more we are able to give of ourselves, the more we have—not only in dollars, but in joy, because there is a real happiness to be had when we give our time and our dollars. A few of us even believe that the many good things happening around this place have something to do with the blessings our dollars and our volunteer efforts are having in places like Angola or with the dreamers. A lot of us have the idea that our family is a whole lot bigger than the faces on our refrigerators and that God wants us to see the whole world as family. But I think you know most of that.

You know also that there are real expenses and real challenges. You know that there are mission partners locally and around the world who count on our caring as a congregation. You know that there is insurance and lighting and salaries and maintenance. You know that there is a carefully managed budget and hundreds and hundreds of volunteer hours that multiply our giving and touch this community in beautiful ways.

You know all of that because you give with a beautiful generosity that has overflowed the budget the last several years in a row and you care and you are here and the last time I checked, you did not fall off a turnip truck or belong to that very tiny group of people who someone once described as “the takers”—you are the givers and the sharers and the thinkers and the care-ers and the ones who know that when good things happen it is because good people get together to make them happen and that you know, you already know.

And you also know, or I believe that you know, that God gives first and God gives strength and God gives wisdom and when we give we are giving back and giving forward and investing a part of what we have been given because God first loved us. And so, while I may make a joke about not wanting to talk about money, or asking you to fill out your pledge card and turn it in today or next Sunday, the best thing is that I really don't need to, because you already know.

And so let me say something else that underlies the money talk that's really faith talk and provides the foundation for what I believe we do in this place and in our lives. It might even be the foundation of civilization,

because wherever people are not being civil to one another—wherever there is injustice or hate or bigotry or even war, this quality seems to be in short supply.

Let me talk about giving as gratitude. There are lots of beautiful emotions. There are many positive attitudes of heart and mind that can build up a life and build a community and make our lives more meaningful and touch the world in positive ways, but I can think of none more powerful or more life changing or world impacting than simple gratitude. The medieval Christian mystic Meister Eckhart said once that if the only prayer you ever said in an entire lifetime was the single word “thank you” that would be enough. (Quoted in Spiritual Literacy by Brussat)

Let me attempt a tongue twister: Gratitude as a life attitude is the foundation of happiness. Do you remember when Jesus said “Blessed are the poor in spirit”—those words simply translated could be: “How happy we are when we know that we can’t make it on our own and that we don’t have to.” I have noticed that happy people are grateful people. I have noticed that successful people are grateful people. I have noticed that people who spend their time rocking the boat are not grateful people. I have noticed that the ones who row the boat on any project or who get behind good ideas to make them happen are grateful people. I have noticed that if you look closely at anything that is growing, at its very center you will find gratitude. Gratitude is like sunshine and fertilizer in the garden. Gratitude is what makes the flowers grow and when that attitude is missing, nothing good grows.

I once had a friend who said to me that if worrying was an Olympic event she would be a medal contender. Did you ever notice that worry is not a team sport? Jesus talked about his eternal presence wherever two or three of us were gathered together. Maybe another understanding of his words about the “poor in spirit” would be that true happiness is to know that no matter what, we’re in this thing called life together and that’s all about gratitude. Gratitude as a life attitude is the foundation of happiness.

Let me try another tongue twister: Gratitude as a life attitude is the foundation of healthy relationship. Or as Jesus said it: love your neighbor, love your enemy and love yourself. Some years ago a major study was undertaken to figure out if there was a way to predict whether a relationship would be successful or not; whether a marriage or a committed relationship would be long term. And they filmed and studied couples interacting with one another and they recorded what they said to one another early in their relationship and they followed them for years and years and years. And the strangest thing emerged. Maybe you read this report. The researchers discovered that the single biggest negative predictor was whether they rolled their eyes in one another’s presence.

You know: (demonstrate an eye roll). Rolling the eyes was a sign that deep down, one or the other of them disrespected the other—was not grateful to the other, was not truly thankful for the person they were with—did not see the other as bearing the image of the Holy—that the other was not really worthy and the relationships failed on that basis. It was simply a failure of gratitude.

And does that say anything to us about the family of nations on this good earth? Does that say anything about why it is so easy to trash-talk people who follow different religions or people who look different or think differently or are stuck in a political rut different than the one we’re stuck in? If I am grateful to God for you, if we are truly grateful for one another and for this amazing human family, then so much that leads to strife and disharmony and even war is placed in the light of God’s love. One of you said it so well: we can never make our own candle any brighter by attempting to blow out the candle of another. Gratitude as a life attitude is the foundation of healthy relationship.

Here’s another tongue twister: Gratitude as a life attitude is the foundation of healing. Now I know that all of you have read about the correlation between stress and illness. People under stress get sicker quicker and stay sicker longer or so I have heard.

Now I have to be very careful here. I am not a scientist and I am not that kind of doctor, but I do know that lots of illnesses are organic or just happen because these wonderful bodies of ours wear out or have genetic imperfections. Little bugs doing wicked things cause lots of illness, but a failure of gratitude is like offering those little critters a red carpet and an engraved invitation to take up residence; failing to be grateful feeds whatever ails us with its favorite food.

Jesus was a healer because Jesus sought to put harmony in our hearts and peace in our minds. Stress causes distress and distress takes away our ease and when the ease is gone, the dis-ease takes its place.

Gratitude, being thankful, thankful for others, for care givers and friends, for life and for this world is a way of throwing the entire power of the creator God into the battle with whatever it is that robs us of our ease. Gratitude as a life attitude is the foundation of healing.

One last thing: Gratitude as a life attitude is the best hope we have for the future. I don't have a crystal ball and I was absent the day they talked about prognostication in the seminary I attended so I missed out on that too. Please, I beg you, don't ask me what the stock market is about to do or what tweet or trick might appear in the night, but I do know that if you and I understand our life journey as a pilgrimage of gratitude from God to God, hand in hand with God-giving as God gives, the future is taken care of. In the future that we might doubt or worry about, nothing that can hurt us or surprise us or offend us or confuse us, because we belong and are safe and loved and accepted, by the one who will never let us go. Gratitude as a life attitude is the best hope we have for the future.

Now, this was supposed to be a sermon asking you for money, but it has degenerated into a discussion of gratitude. May I be so bold as to suggest, my beloved friends, that if you and I get the attitude of gratitude, the money around this place will take care of itself? Thank you, thank you all and thank God! Amen.