

## Justice, Mercy, Faith—and Money

Today I am describing the communication functions of money. I am building on Joseph Fletcher's Situation Ethics, where he emphasized "Justice, Mercy, and Faith" as love reasonably applied to how money is spent. The way we use money signals what we worship. Let me get three things out of the way now. First, UU clergy seldom talk about money. I don't know why, but I catch clues that tell me they feel it is something smarmy. Second, I know the value of a dollar from painful personal experience, but I won't expect you to make the same decisions I have made. Third, this isn't about Pledge Sunday, in spite of how this coincidentally is time to consider your annual pledge. Any connections you choose to make are up to you.

First, maybe UU clergy, like other clergy, don't like to talk about money for the budget because it can sound self-serving in support of their salary. So, instead, ministers describe Unitarian Universalist values or new directions in order to persuade you to give more money. Too often, there's an awkwardness, but I have come to see it as possibly fear they will release their pent-up frustrations on their congregation for being stingy. One of my colleagues inserted this into a meditation: "Let our compassion not be drained through twenty-dollar checks for charitable indulgences." Hey, twenty bucks is not nothing and if that's all you can afford, that's simple reality. Reinhold Niebuhr, one of the top theologians and ethicists of the past century, published his journal of his parish career and was pretty snarky with disdain for a fellow clergyman who rode about town in a chauffeured limo. He wrote this about another colleague: "Here is a preacher whom I have suspected of cowardice for years because he never deviated by a hair's breadth from the economic prejudices of his wealthy congregation." ( Reinhold Niebuhr, Leaves From The Notebook of A Tamed Cynic, pg. 78) He also later wrote: "Charlie has lost his pastorate. I am not surprised. He is courageous but tactless." (Niebuhr, Leaves, pg. 85) Or maybe clergy are caught in what:

A therapist once wrote: "Money questions will be treated by cultured people in the same manner as sexual matters, with the same inconsistency,

prudishness, and hypocrisy.” The year was 1913. The therapist was Sigmund Freud. (David W. Kreuger, The Last Taboo, pg. vii)

Freud, two decades later, wrote that anyone can talk about sex now, but money is the last taboo. With such a heavily charged atmosphere, can we find a way to relax? We have an award-winning UU curriculum about sexuality, but where’s the curriculum about money? Where’s our much-advertised courage to face the uncomfortable in order to promote truth and emotional health?

Second, I’ve been poor. I know how hard it can be to get a dollar. At twelve, I had to work 20 hours per week at an adult job for fifty cents an hour as the janitor and gift wrapper for a women’s clothing store, plus feed our farm animals. I decided that my form of being rich would be work whereby I could see and feel that what I did was of human services value. Not everyone has the same opportunities nor focus as I did. I got very lucky later. I’m grateful for my good fortune. And who would fix our plumbing or trade stocks for us? We could use some good tradespeople around here. We all find ourselves in different places about money. If you happen to feel poor right now, or in a few minutes, just meditate on what you can do with the little you have.

Third, if you’re feeling poor, and afraid I’m going to hassle you for money, just ponder the sermon content and apply it however you wish. I have negative interest in hassling you. If you feel hassled by my wife, please report back to me.

Today, I am taking the phrase from Joseph Fletcher’s Situation Ethics that he returns to repeatedly, “Justice, Mercy and Faith,” and applying it to money. Fletcher demands that we see Justice as love reasonably applied. I see that the three virtues must form a triad, since Justice without Mercy is cruelly cold, and Mercy without fairness is sentimental slop, and both of them have to be grounded in a faith that animates our souls day-to-day and year-to-year or we would not stay with the program.

In the literature on money, writers often observe that money *appears* to satisfy many emotional needs without actually doing so. Money is fungible, it can be turned into a lot of goods and services, without however being of ultimate significance. Kreuger, in The Last Taboo, says:

some individuals attempt to equate financial worth with internal value (esteem, confidence). The person who feels empty inside, whose self-esteem depends primarily on the response of others rather than internal references, is committing to a relentless pursuit of external validation: wealth, applause, admiration, and material status symbols. (Kreuger, Taboo, pg.14)

This is not to say that the “empty people” don’t receive validation, they often do, reinforcing that a kind of love—perhaps admiration--has been achieved. For example, when we landed at a regional airport in Puerto Rico at 4:00AM, I went straight to the Hertz car rental counter. I had pre-ordered a Honda sedan. The rental agent said all he had was a black Dodge Charger, a larger car for the same price. I was stuck.

“It’s fast,” the clerk said, by way of recommendation.

In the parking lot, I was surprised to see a throwback to “The Dukes of Hazard” TV show. That was our rental. Almost all of Puerto Rico’s roads are narrow, winding and twisting but my “muscle car” was fat, long, and too wide to park easily. Annoying. However, several middle-aged Puerto Rican guys congratulated me—in English--on my possession of such a fine vehicle. One man sought me out in a parking lot to brag that he had one too. “It’s fast!” one middle-aged woman approvingly noted. Clearly, it indicated to them that I was something very special; I had stellar personal qualities.

Let us turn to various religious folks, Christian, Jewish, Muslim, and Buddhist for their input. Luke, in the Second Testament, has Jesus tell his disciples directly, matter-of-factly, that they must give up their worldly possessions in order to follow him. Jesus then lists three stories in a row that illustrate how everybody will fail to be so spiritual. He tells of the prodigal son who returns to his father after squandering great wealth but the good, loyal son who helped his father prosper objects to celebrating his wasteful brother. His father says, “My son, you are with me always and all I have is yours. But it was only right we should celebrate and rejoice, because your brother here was dead and has come to life, he was lost and is found.” Jesus is essentially saying that the likelihood of people

failing to handle money in a spiritually consistent way is slim, but our repeated effort matters.

Jesus notes that one should be honest in both large and small matters, because “You cannot be the slave both of God and of money.” I recently paid a neighbor \$12 I owed him, and he had forgotten about. I told him, “I try to pay my debts,” and he responded with: “I never cheat with small things. If it’s big enough I’ll steal.”

Finally, Jesus contrasted the fate of a rich man who dressed and dined well with that of poor Lazarus, covered in sores “who longed to fill himself with the scraps that fell from the rich man’s table.” After death took them both, Abraham “held Lazarus in his bosom” in heaven but the rich man burned in Hades without hope. (Luke 14:28-16:31, The Jerusalem Bible) That’s a lot of fear attached to money, and I don’t see that train of thought leading to spiritual growth.

This argument is brilliant. Jesus recommends poverty to his apostles but acknowledges that pleasure looks good, but it is important to be trustworthy and says the ruthless rich will be punished eternally. This is a dialectical argument that recommends a thesis of ascetic sacrifice to experience spiritual love, considers the antithesis of an apparent option of shady dealings and the regret of the upright citizen, but settles for a reckoning that favors the merciful and faithful.

To take a more recent theory, The Handbook of Jewish Thought says:

It is a blessing to be able to earn our own way in the world and thereby enjoy the fruits of our own labor, as the Psalmist writes “You shall eat the fruit of your labor—you shall be happy and it shall be well with you”(Psalms 128:2). Still, one’s business or career should always be secondary to his duties before God. One who places material considerations before his service of God is guilty of violating the commandment to love God above all.

And then there is:

Raed Saleh, director of the Syrian Civil Defense Force: “a group of volunteers,” as he describes it, “who rush to the scene of recent bombings to try to save people trapped beneath the rubble.” The organization’s work, he wrote,

“is guided by an Islamic principle, written in the Quran: “Whoever saves one life, it is written as if he has saved all humanity.””

This is intended as a hybrid Jewish/Islamic principle, applied appropriately also to financial losses.

Thich Nhat Hanh said, “There is no need to run, strive, search or struggle. Just be. Most people cannot believe that just walking as if you have nowhere to go is enough. ‘The Buddha said, ‘My practice is the practice of nonpractice. Give up all struggle. Allow yourself to be, to rest.’” (Seth Mydans, “Thich Nhat Hanh on Life, War, and Happiness,” *The New York Times*, 01-22-2022)

If this spiritual emphasis on ultimate values is so true that it is embedded in the wisdom literature of past millennia, why is it not more convincing? Shouldn't we have long ago already said, “Oh, yeah, I see how important it is to be fair with our energy and money, to be merciful to those we meet and those we merely hear about, and keep that faith daily?” I initially tried to frame these directives as coming from a much quieter age before cell phones and the internet. We live in a very noisily intrusive environment, one where mental and sensory Fritos are easily available; pleasure is available in various forms. But it was also hard in a quieter age to focus on God or your ultimate values because we naturally seek whatever feels good. Immediate, sweet pleasure can obviously distract us from a quieter, spiritual fulfillment.

However, we are not merely reactive organisms. We also want to speak our truths and express ourselves. Money is a form of language. What you spend your money on is what you value and is one of the criteria for values clarification. When we speak, we clarify what we believe and that strengthens our resolve. There is a different and deeper pleasure that accompanies such actions. Once, when I was an antiwar organizer, attending the Martin Luther King, Jr. School for Social Change, I dressed in a black robe, painted my face like a skull, and entered a local Selective Service office. Another student announced, “The Spirit of Death has come to the Draft System.” I stood in the office, not speaking but speaking volumes by my presence. I was arrested on three counts and jailed for a few hours. Gandhi had welcomed imprisonment because it gave him time to think but

Martin Luther King, Jr. feared it, for good reason. I was testing my resolve when I asserted my right and courage to live out my convictions. Money is like that. When we spend or give our money, we are asserting our right and conviction that this is supporting something good, first and foremost for ourselves, and second for anyone who benefits or witnesses what we do. Conceptualizing money as a language enables us to have some objectivity about how our spending is a form of witness to our values.

Money is power concentrated and subject to strong emotions of pride, hope, guilt, and envy, among others. Imagine you tell your closest five friends that you are rich. Imagine their reactions. (pause) Such a statement can stimulate envy for others and anxiety for you. Being envied can be a fearful, guilty experience. Short of that experiment, just take a moment and think of how hard you have worked for what you have. (pause) That's power, right there, and pride, but you've paid enough attention to the current spirit of the times to know that it is also privilege. That's where guilt can come in, because it is partially due to others' enslavement that you have part of what you have earned, and you also worked hard.

To treasure "Justice, Mercy, and Faith" realistically means that however much you might spend or donate you aren't going to make much of a dent in Justice or Mercy writ large. You can make a difference in Faith, because to whatever extent you can see yourself as upholding your values courageously, consistently, and hopefully, you have been faithful. You have held up against the siren calls of both pleasure and martyrdom. You have resisted the despair of helplessness. I will close with three quotes from Reinhold Niebuhr:

Nothing that is worth doing can be achieved in a lifetime; therefore we must be saved by hope.

Nothing we do, however virtuous, can be accomplished alone; therefore we are saved by love.

Nothing which is true or beautiful or good makes complete sense in any immediate context of history; therefore we must be saved by faith. (Reinhold Niebuhr Quotes, w.w.w.brainyquote.com 2-3-2008)