

Better Than Stuff¹

Rev. Myke Johnson

March 6, 2011

Allen Avenue Unitarian Universalist Church

A Lesson for All Ages Being Greedy, Being Generous (A conversation with the children)

Did you ever feel like you were two people inside one body? I do sometimes. Here is what I mean. Deep inside me there are two feelings:

Sometimes, I feel greedy or stingy—I want all to keep everything for myself—like, I'll just go in my room, with a big bunch of grapes and a video game, and no one can come in. Does that ever happen to you?

Make your body into a greedy pose. (*frown, arms hugged tight*)

But sometimes, I feel generous—I want to share what I have with my friends.

It makes me happy to make someone else happy—so if I bring my big bunch of grapes to my friend's house, he gives me a big smile, and then we play games together, eat grapes, and we are laughing and happy. Does that every happen to you?

Make your body into a generous pose. (*smile, open arms out*)

Every person has a struggle inside between being greedy and being generous, between wanting to keep everything and wanting to give. Let's do it with our bodies again: "greedy" "generous"

Sometimes I think we are afraid inside—we think if we give, we might not have enough for ourselves. Sometimes fear makes us greedy. But greed makes us lonely. Love is what helps us to open our hearts to giving and sharing. When we say, We believe in Love, we are helping our hearts to open up.

I think there are three different ways we can open our hearts to give and share, three different ways to be generous. Usually when we talk about giving we are talking about giving to other people. I give some of my grapes to my friend. Or we give some mittens and hats or food to people who don't have any. Have any of you brought in mittens or hats or food for our collection box? So that is one way to be generous. Can you think of other ways that we give to other people?

A second way to be generous is to be generous to ourselves. If we are mean to ourselves, we won't be nice to other people either. For example, when we save up our money for something special, that is being generous to ourselves. Or, we can also give ourselves time—time to play with friends, or time to learn about a hobby. Can you think of other ways that we give to ourselves? It is important to be kind and generous to ourselves. That is part of love too.

¹ Copyright 2011 by Rev. Myke Johnson and Allen Avenue UU Church. Permission to reprint for other than personal use must be requested from office@a2u2.org, and is usually granted.

There is a third way to be generous. My very favorite way to be generous is when we give and receive at the same time. When we help each other out, and each person gives and receives, that is a very special kind of generosity. So for example, let's say you have some snow shoes, and your friend would like to go out in the snow. You've already been out, and want to do something inside. So you loan your snow shoes to your friend, and she loans you her new music video to watch. And you both get to enjoy each other's stuff. It is like you have twice as much fun when you share. Can you think of other ways that we give and receive at the same time?

Another way to give and receive at the same time, is when we give time or money or stuff to a group that we are part of--when we do that, we are giving to ourselves and to other people. So, for example, when you give some money for your girl scout group, or give time by selling cookies—then you get to do fun activities with the money everyone gives.

It is just like that when your family gives money and time to our church. It is like you are giving to yourself and to other people all at the same time. That is what our stewardship campaign is all about—it is about giving and receiving at the same time.

The grown-ups are going to talk some more about that today.

But first, we 're going to sing the Magic Penny song by Malvina Reynolds, which talks about that kind of giving.

“Love is something if you give it away, you end up having more...

It's just like a magic penny, hold it close and you won't have any

But lend it, spend it and you'll have so many, they'll roll all over the floor”

So, let's try it again with our bodies... greedy, generous.

We have a little reminder to give you--about love and being generous—some magic pennies, with hearts on them. You can take one for yourself, and one to give away to someone else.

Sermon

I want to share with you a story from the Islamic tradition:

A wise woman who was traveling in the mountains found a precious stone in a stream. The next day she met another traveler who was hungry, and the wise woman opened her bag to share her food. The hungry traveler saw the precious stone and asked the woman to give it to him. She did so without hesitation. The traveler left, rejoicing in his good fortune. He knew the stone was worth enough to give him security for a lifetime. But a few days later he came back to return the stone to the wise woman. “I've been thinking,” he said, “I know how valuable the stone is, but I give it back in the hope that you can give me something even more precious: Give me what you have within you that enabled you to give me the stone.”

I love this story first of all because it acknowledges that generosity is a mystery—the traveler was baffled by the wise woman who could so easily part with a precious stone. Who among us wouldn't like to have a stone that could provide security for the rest of our lives? Who among us wouldn't rejoice over such a precious stone, and immediately feel less frightened about the future. And yet, the woman gave it away. Who among us would be able to give it away, without hesitation? No wonder the traveler wanted to find out that other thing she was carrying inside of her. I want to have that treasure too!

As we watch events unfold in Wisconsin, Ohio, Washington, and in our own state, we see more and more insecurity for more and more people. Unemployment remains high, safety nets for the poor are being dismantled, and pensions and health care for the middle class are being shredded.

It seems like greed is taking over our country. In the last quarters of 2010, U.S. corporations were showing record high profits—record profits!—but that didn't translate into more jobs. In fact, job cuts helped to build the profits. The super-rich have become even more wealthy, while wages and wealth for everyone else are going down and down. And what do our politicians talk about? More tax cuts for the wealthy.

An aspect of the Wisconsin crisis that is not often mentioned on the mainstream news is that Gov. Scott Walker and his conservative legislature have enacted four huge tax cuts for corporations, at the same time as they are claiming budget deficits as the reason for cutting state workers income and pensions. It is the same game as Maine's Gov. LePage is playing. In his two year budget proposal, Gov. LePage would lower the top income tax rate, and pay for it by cuts to teachers and state workers pension benefits.²

As one commenter on "ataxingmatter" blog notes: "Cut taxes, create a deficit, then say we must cut wages because of a budget crisis. Why not do the opposite. Raise taxes, create a surplus, give everyone a raise. It makes just as much sense and benefits more people."³

All of it is making me so angry and sad. And scared. I have a friend in the southwest who is unemployed and very close to losing her home. She was talking about how suicidal she has been feeling, afraid to become homeless, not sure where to turn. Someone else that she knows did commit suicide when they lost their job. More and more power is accumulating in the hands of the few, and more and more people are falling through the cracks.

The politicians say we must make our state business friendly, in order to create more jobs—but the tax cuts don't translate into more jobs, just more profits. Now they are waging war on the unions, which have been the primary vehicle for gaining so much of our middle class prosperity in this country.

² "At hearing, businesses laud tax cuts," *The Portland Press Herald*, March 1, 2011, p. 1.

³ Posted by Jerry Critter, February 28, 2011 at <http://ataxingmatter.blogspot.com/tax/2011/02/labor-protests-continue.html>

Unions fought against child labor and worker exploitation, won the forty hour work week, created the weekend, and fought for benefits such as health care and retirement that enabled people to have a measure of security in their lives. All of that is under attack, under the guise of budget problems and bolstering the economy. Remember, the major corporations just had record profits in the last two quarters of last year.

In the midst of this scary and unfriendly time, what can one say about generosity? The very rich are grabbing more and more of the wealth, and everyone else is afraid, and is grabbing whatever they can, to feel a sense of security, but it seems there is no place to go but down. We desperately need a visionary alternative. It may sound crazy, but in my mind, generosity might be the only antidote to the greed pandemic.

What is security really about? Do we get security from money? Some. Do we get security from building a shelter in our basement and stockpiling food and water, and maybe a gun so we can protect it from other people? It has been noted that most of us could lose all we have with one major illness, or by getting laid off from our jobs. Most people are one paycheck away from disaster. We need a visionary alternative.

At a recent church meeting, I was reminded of a story I had heard long ago—a story about Jesus feeding 5000 people. Maybe you've heard it before.

The way it is told in the Bible, Jesus was teaching the crowds, and then evening came on, and his disciples told him they should send the crowd away, so people could go get dinner. Jesus said, "why don't you feed them yourselves?" One disciple protested, "but we only have 5 loaves of bread and a few fish! Hardly enough for ourselves." Jesus said, "still, invite everyone to sit down, and pass out the food." Now, when Jesus made these wacky suggestions, the disciples didn't know what else to do but follow his orders. So they invited the crowd to sit down, and started passing out the loaves and fishes. And according to the story, everyone had enough to eat—in fact, they collected 12 baskets of leftovers.

In traditional understandings, this was one of the supernatural miracles of Jesus. But other commentators have suggested a more human miracle took place that day. Once people saw the disciples giving out their food to everyone, the people brought out the sandwiches, and vegetables and fruits that they had been keeping in their bags and pockets, and they began to share it with everyone too. Generosity and sharing took over the 5000 people, and everyone had more than enough to eat.

We need a visionary alternative. That story gives me hope. It reminds me that a few people can start a transformation. That if we share what we have with each other, we will have so much more than we need. That generosity is contagious—it has the capacity to start a chain reaction. It goes viral, as we say today. That if we can find the strength to get it started, change can happen. It can happen right where we are, even while battles rage in the state capitals of the United States.

The struggle between greed and generosity is a very old one. The ancient prophets of the Hebrew bible were preaching about it. They condemned the wealthy kings who did not care for the widows and orphans. They encouraged people to share their bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless into their homes.⁴ Every religion of the world has sought to inspire kindness and giving, to spark that contagious sharing. The struggle lives within each of us, right inside the fear and courage of our hearts. It shapes the great systems of power and economics in our world. I believe we cannot fight greed with more greed. I believe generosity can be a visionary alternative. And perhaps that is what the traveler saw in the wise woman—a power greater than wealth.

When we open our hearts and our hands to mutual giving and receiving, we discover a different kind of security. We realize that we are more secure when our neighbors have what they need, as well as ourselves. We realize that part of our security lies in a common effort to build the roads and schools and libraries that we all use. Part of our security lies in our networks of friends and neighbors with whom we can share a meal, or a ride, or a ladder, or a pair of snow shoes. We have more security when we have a friend who will come and feed our cats when we go on a trip. We have more security when we have friends who care about the future, and talk together about how we can help each other. Generosity builds community and community creates a kind of security that can weather many economic storms.

I believe we are in some hard times, and likely to be facing some more hard times in the near future. The values that we care about are under assault. It is easy to feel discouraged. But in these times, we need each other more than ever.

Our annual stewardship campaign is an opportunity to reflect on what Allen Avenue UU Church means in our lives. For me, an important part of what it means is a visionary alternative. In a world of insecurity and greed, Allen Avenue is a place to explore true security and true giving and receiving. Our theology teaches us that what happens will depend on each of us. There is no rescuer that will show up and make things all better. Each one of us is needed to create a world that is full of kindness and caring. Each one of us can help to spark the power of love. When we give to this community, we are giving to ourselves and to each other.

In these times of economic trouble, I don't want to forget that some of our members are not able to give much financially. We have not all been affected in the same ways by these times. Those of us who are able, who have jobs and resources, have an opportunity to open our hearts and share what we can. Those of us who are struggling can still share what we are able to share. We need all of us to stay in the circle together, to hear the truth of what is happening, to keep our eyes open, and our hearts open. We may need to be even more creative than we have ever been before, in growing a community that transforms lives through the power of love.

4 Isaiah 58

There is an old Jewish curse, "May you live in interesting times." But here we are—we are living in very interesting times. Whether we are cursed or blessed remains to be seen. Perhaps someday people will tell stories about these times. Perhaps they will tell stories about how we pulled together to make sure no one fell through the cracks. Perhaps they will tell stories about how we finally abandoned the economics of greed, in order that the people and the earth might live in fruitfulness and harmony. Perhaps they will tell stories about how we learned that our relationships were better than our stuff. Perhaps they will even tell stories about Allen Avenue, that we were part of a great change to create a future in which kindness and compassion prevailed.

May it be so.

CLOSING WORDS

We are all in this together.

We may forget that at times, but it is true nonetheless.

These hands that you hold may be your help in the time of your need.

These hands may need your help someday.

When we look on the faces all around us,

let us remember that each one is a part of our family.

Let us remember that we are all in this together.