

In the 1970's, a pair of reporters with the *Niagara Falls Gazette* investigated and wrote about the claims and concerns of families living in the area around two schools, who were experiencing serious health problems, such as birth defects, miscarriages and cancer, in numbers way beyond statistical expectations. As it turned out, the neighborhood was built over a filled-in canal that had been used as a chemical waste dump back in the 1940's. Then, in the mid-1950's, the city of Niagara Falls, acquired the land so they could build two schools on part of it, and then sold the remaining property to local developers. But no one had informed the residents of that neighborhood about the history of that Love Canal property, and so they were completely unaware of the danger of the environmental toxins buried beneath them. So too we can be unaware of cultural toxins surrounding us, and in particular, the seduction of materialism, consumerism and greed. Just as the residents at the Love Canal area were unaware of the risk & danger of deadly toxin pollution surrounding them, so too we can be blissfully unaware and oblivious of how culture's influence can endanger our spiritual health and the faithful authenticity of our walk with God. It was against that danger, that in

Luke 16:13-15, Jesus warned,

No one can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth." The Pharisees, who were lovers of money, heard all this, and they ridiculed him. So he said to them, "You are those who justify yourselves in the sight of others; but God knows your hearts; for what is prized by human beings is an abomination (or pollution) in the sight of God.

Right from the very beginning, and running all through Scripture, God is revealed as a God of goodness, blessing and abundance. Genesis starts out as a song that describes God's generosity our world is created and it is good, all creation is blessed, and human beings are told, "be fruitful and multiply", as the goodness of God overflows all that he has created. That theme of God's overflowing goodness and grace toward us continues as God blesses Abraham with abundance, and explains, receive my blessing and you will be a blessing to all nations... which was an echo of the blessings of Creation, a force of goodness and well-being active in the world. But the blessing of God's abundance is challenged when Pharaoh has a bad dream that there will be a famine in the land, and he responds with greed, fear that there won't be enough. And for the first time since the beginning of Creation, Pharaoh introduces the concept of scarcity, a God-denying fear that there might not be enough... which leads to a perspective of greed and materialism, that to be safe, I've got to acquire all that I possibly can... which led to the disastrous results of Egyptian slavery.

Against that enslavement to the fear and avarice of scarcity, along the Exodus journey, God reintroduces the concept to abundance and blessing, as God's love trickles down in the form of bread. Each day, except for Sabbath rest, they received manna, a freely given gift in abundance, the gift of bread to eat. Everybody could gather enough, as much as anyone needed, in sharp contrast to Pharaoh's greed & toxic fear of scarcity. That same lesson and truth of God's abundance gets repeated when Jesus fed the multitude with just a few barley loaves. An important detail is that when everyone had eaten all they wanted the disciples gathered up 12 baskets filled with abundance, in contrast to this world's perspective, a toxic fear of scarcity. The point is, as Christians living in this culture of materialism and greed; we are exposed constantly to toxins of consumerism and fear of not having enough.

So how do we live faithfully amid these opposing perspectives of Pharaoh's toxic greed and fear of scarcity, that demands endless production and always to acquire more and more, and God's gracious promise of abundance, blessing us with enough, that we can be a blessing to others? Clearly, the way we relate to money and wealth is a spiritual concern that both reflects, and influences our spiritual health, and that will either draw us closer or lure us away from walking in faithful obedience as guided by the Holy Spirit. And since we do live amid cultural toxins of greed and materialism, our attitude and behavior concerning wealth and resources will require continuous reflection, recommitment & renewal. We know for example, to be a

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person of honor and integrity is not just a one-time thing but must be sustained over the course of a lifetime decision by decision. Each and every time we are tempted to compromise with truth, we have to choose, and either we live up to the high ideals to which we aspire, or we will not. In the same way, we decide how we will use our lives and resources: focused primarily on acquiring more wealth and possessions, or choosing to respond to God's blessings and grace through our faithful stewardship of God's abundance. Used appropriately and wisely, our life's resources can serve to honor and glorify God, and used to accomplish good & incredible things in this world. I know that most of us really do want to be faithful stewards, and that we do want Jesus to be our Lord and Master over even our money, our time and all our resources. But the stark reality and difficult truth is the attractive glitter that this world has to offer, is a spiritual struggle we'll battle so long as we live.

So is there any hope? Is there any help? Yes, I find that the Apostle Paul's letter to the Christians living in Corinth most hopeful & helpful in thinking through my attitude toward generous giving. The earliest Christians were mostly Jews living in Jerusalem. But when a Jew converted to Christ, their family and friends would perceive them as enemies and betrayers of Judaism, and oftentimes cut them off socially and economically... which frequently meant financial ruin & impoverished suffering. Also about the same time, the Apostle Paul was spreading the Good News out into the gentile world, which was leading to some difficult conflict, as the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem had considerable doubt about these gentile converts, and whether or not they were really all of the same faith. Paul recognized this great need in Jerusalem as an opportunity, through which the Church could truly come together as one. So the Apostle Paul urged other Christians from other areas, especially gentiles of the missionary churches that he had founded, to take up special offerings so to help support their fellow believers of Jerusalem, so much in need. In this passage to the Christians living in Corinth, hoping to encourage them to give more generously, Paul describes the generosity of the churches in Macedonia.

2 Corinthians 8:2-5 for during a severe ordeal of affliction, their abundant joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part...they voluntarily gave according to their means, and even beyond their means, begging us earnestly for the privilege of sharing in this ministry to the saints— they gave themselves first to the Lord.

Despite having far less resources than those in wealthy Corinth, the Macedonians were remarkably generous and begged to do more, and as Paul pointed out, it was because,

2 Corinthians 8:5, ... they gave themselves first to the Lord.

And that is the whole point of faithful Christian stewardship, and that is how we overcome the polluting toxins of our culture of materialism, consumerism and our fear of scarcity. First, God gives to us, and then we give ourselves to the Lord. It's in response to the invitation of God's grace & blessings, that with joy & gratitude we give our whole selves to God. The true picture and perspective of Christian stewardship, is like the Jewish people of Exodus in the wilderness gathering God's blessing and abundance of manna. There's enough for all to have what they need, and enough to let the blessings and abundance of God flow freely through us, and out into the world to make a real difference as a proclamation of the glory and grace of our Lord. My friends, look around, and have you been noticing that God is active and up to something wonderful and amazing, here in this place, among us at First Presbyterian Church? And don't we all want to be part of whatever God is doing next? If there should be any financial shortfall or lack of resources, then we've got to stop listening and believing the lies of culture and Pharaoh, their a fear of scarcity, - for I am certain that God has not stopped blessing, nor has God stopped or decreased doing grace and abundance. And that is God Good News, as Paul reminds us,

2 Corinthians 9:10-11, 15

He who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will supply and multiply your seed for sowing and increase the harvest of your righteousness. You will be enriched in every way for your great

generosity, which will produce thanksgiving to God through us; Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!

Nelson is an old friend, a pastor serving in Ghana, who has taught me a lot about materialism and spirituality, and occasionally I've sent money in support of his ministry. But in all the years of our friendship, he's never written back, "Thanks Norm, you are a generous and giving guy, thanks for your generosity in sending me your money." But rather, he writes, "I thank God for entrusting that money to you, for you to send to me." My generosity and kindness don't seem to impress him much at all, but rather, it's all thanks to God and glory to God alone, because as he sees it, I'm just the middleman, God's conduit, for Nelson knows, that whatever money I sent him, that it's really all provision and gift from God. He figures that God gives me a little extra, more than I need, just like manna in abundance, so that I can send it on and thereby share and participate in his ministry. Theologically, that is the reality of Christian stewardship. We serve as God's conduits, pipes for carrying God's blessings as God provides us a little extra, so that we can send it on. Therefore, Christian stewardship is just passing along that little extra that God graciously entrusts to each of us.

When I was in Africa, the coolest and most joyful part of worship was the offering and everybody looked forward to it. The music and drums would start, we stand and start swaying and dancing in our pews and then file past a big washtub in the front as with great flourish we'd drop in our offering... it was a physical expression of joy and gratitude and faith, as by our movement it was wonderful to give ourselves to the Lord. I long for us to enjoy that same delight of generous commitment as we celebrate the Good News of Jesus Christ, as during our closing hymn today, we joyfully present and commit our whole selves to God symbolized by coming forward and placing our pledge cards in the basket.