

Mount Hollywood United Church of Christ – Los Angeles
Twenty-fourth Sunday after Pentecost – November 8, 2015
Pilgrimage to the Manger
Rev. Anne G. Cohen, Minister

Mark 12:38-44

REFLECTION

"Where justice is denied, where poverty is enforced, where ignorance prevails, and where any one class is made to feel that society is an organized conspiracy to oppress, rob and degrade them, neither persons nor property will be safe."

~ Frederick Douglass, American Civil Rights Activist (1817-1895)

"In a country well governed, poverty is something to be ashamed of. In a country badly governed, wealth is something to be ashamed of."

~ Confucius, Chinese Philosopher (551-479 BC)

In-Voluntary Poverty

For about 8 years John and I were members of a Simplicity Circle. We read books like Your Money or Your Life by Joe Dominguez and Vicki Robin and Circle of Simplicity by Cecile Andrews.

We became an accountability group for simplifying our lives, greening our lifestyles, decluttering our homes, taking action on issues we cared about.

We researched our passions, provided a discernment group for serious decisions and changed our lives so that we could live closer to our core values.

One couple started and is now running a flourishing non-profit providing support to people with chronic pain and lobbying for legislation to change medical practices and philosophies around pain issues. www.forgrace.com

Another couple moved to the Midwest where they could support themselves more easily while actually being writers. Yet another couple moved north to "live on the land."

The founder of our group worked for an oil company, quit for a year to explore employment with alternative energy and, failing that, found work with another oil company in their environmental impact department.

Others of us installed rain catch systems and raised vegetable beds, bamboo flooring and solar power installations on our roofs. We moved retirement investments into social responsible accounts, became members of community gardens, explored alternative (non-commercial) holiday celebrations, bought only used clothing, had group hikes and bought nothing on Black Fridays, had numerous collaborative yard sales, and, where we could, we helped each other with the labor and research – and, of course, the snacks.

A number of these people are still among our closest allies and friends – godparents to our child and sources of wisdom when we have questions about drought resistant gardens or investment choices. And I think we all drive Priuses. Or Leafs. Or other electric prototypes.

In some ways we simplified our standard of living while shrinking our carbon footprint and clarifying/living closer to our core values. We also got very busy with our passions and met less and less frequently – ultimately forgoing our gatherings for our work and families – decisions we made together – with love and understanding. We continue on the journey – on parallel, sometimes crossing paths – and are grateful for each other.

One of the issues we wrestled with and reminded ourselves to address over and over again was that we were practicing Voluntary Simplicity. We had more than enough and were attempting to relieve ourselves of that burden by simplifying. We did everything by choice. Others around us were and are suffering from Involuntary Simplicity aka Poverty – and we needed to find ways to shift resources their way, relieve the burden of low income people by increasing access to privileges we relied on out of habit.

Urban farming and urban harvesting are movements that are increasing among enlightened communities – where groups are forming both community and individual farms that sustain neighborhoods – and extra fruit in season is harvested from people's yards and taken to food pantries. This is actually something Leslie is working on – as Hollywood Lutheran has some land that can be used exactly for this purpose.

Donating working vehicles and nearly-new clothing that can be worn to job interviews and work – to organizations that work with populations in need – is a win-win choice. Carrying blankets and backpacks with supplies in the trunk of the car to hand out to street-residents is a good and – in the winter – necessary thing.

But involuntary poverty is systemic. And it has been systemic since the dawn of civilization. Some people believe that we inherently deserve the lives we live – some born to privilege because of worth – others meant to be poor because they are lacking in some way. “Survival of the fittest” is an excuse for economic disparity often used by those who would deny that humans are now or ever were animals operating out of instincts and natural drives.

Even at Burning Man, the principle of Radical Self-Reliance presents the expectation that all 70,000 attendees will come with enough to sustain themselves – plus enough to give away – and those who come with the intention to live off the kindness and generosity of others are disparaged. (“Glitter Ponies” is the nickname for the best dressed of the “moochers.”) People who don’t have enough for the entry ticket, let alone the supplies to survive the event, can’t go. And that was the main point of Laura’s Project Radical Inclusion – to offset this poisonous economic attitude that eats away at even the best of social experiments.

It was this poison that Jesus was addressing with his social experiment 2000 years ago. Religious and political leaders had an attitude of entitlement and a prevailing belief that they were worthier than others in the sight of G-d – and therefore deserved their standard of living. Jesus suggested that they needed an attitude adjustment (something Pope Francis seems to take to heart.)

And Jesus wasn’t the only one – he didn’t invent the social conscience. Scholars point out that the story of the widow’s pittance (and her extraordinary generosity) was not unique – there are similar stories in Buddhist tradition, rabbinic literature, and Greek writings of the time. At the heart of this story is also the message that no matter how little you own – you STILL have choices – about where and when to be generous, to live according to your core values, to redistribute even your meager belongings.

Another thing to remember is that our Jesus – the guy whose example we follow – wasn’t born to privilege. Buddha was. And he made some life choices that allowed him to become more compassionate and live more simply among the poor.

Jesus was born poor, worked with his father as a rough carpenter and understood involuntary poverty from the inside out. Imagine what our story would be like without the manger and animals and poor shepherds, a prince born to royals – into wealth. It kind of changes the entire feeling of our Gospel stories – and certainly the feeling of Christmas!

The tension between voluntary and involuntary poverty (aka simplicity) is also at the heart of our life as a building-less congregation with responsibility for the stewardship of a healthy bank account. That tension is never more apparent than when we are soliciting pledges for the coming year and suggesting a budget that includes some risk-taking on behalf of systemic and social change.

Not all of us have a margin in our budgets. For some of us giving is as difficult as it was for our beloved temple widow. For others of us we have enough to give without suffering but we make choices about WHERE we will invest that discretionary income. And for others, it basically comes down to how generous we are feeling on any given day.

At the bottom of all of this for all of us is choosing the path for our pilgrimage. How deeply do we believe that we need to be involved in changing an unjust social system? And how do we want to go about doing this? Is Mt. Hollywood UCC a community of discernment and accountability for us? Is this group of people doing work that is worth investing in – work that will influence and reshape our human trajectory? Does Mt. Hollywood fuel and support our core values? Is it worth our time and energy and creativity and resources? And, if so, what does that look like for each one of us in the coming year?

There is a place at the end of our bulletin to make our personal commitment. This is our private “note to self” – things we are each choosing to do in the next year – which we can choose to share or not share with others – ask for accountability or trust our own sense of commitment.

And we are receiving today – or this week in the mail – a letter that asks for us to share our financial commitment to Mt. Hollywood UCC – a contract between me, G-d and our bookkeeper. You may send it back or bring it back next Sunday. And that act alone will help your leadership team to work out a budget for changing the world in 2016.

This is a chance to realign our choices with our faith and our values, to make an investment in the future we prefer, to create our path for the weeks and months ahead. Remember the widow, remember the manger, remember those who have fewer choices than we do. For they are our companions on this journey – whether we choose them or not. Thanks be to G-d!

Mark 12:38-44

38 As he taught, he said, "Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, 39 and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets! 40 They devour widows' houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation."

41 He sat down opposite the treasury, and watched the crowd putting money into the treasury. Many rich people put in large sums. 42 A poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which are worth a penny. 43 Then he called his disciples and said to them, **"Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury. 44 For all of them have contributed out of their abundance; but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on."**

"all she had to live on." – lit. "her whole life." (NRSV)
"her whole livelihood." (5 Gospels)

The story of the widow's pittance has parallels in Buddhist tradition, rabbinic literature, Greek writings – widespread sentiment (5 Gospels)

In 2016 I choose to invest my time, energy, resources in these ways on behalf of a "better world" and will seek accountability for these choices with my Beloved Community:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____

Name

Date