

Abundance, August 3, 2025

Friends, wealth disparity is, more than ever, out of control in this country today.

The top 10 percent of wealthy Americans now control 60% of the nation's wealth, while the bottom 50% holds only 6%. When you remove Social Security from those statistics, the gap jumps to 70% at the top, and only 3% for the bottom half.

As I mentioned in the newsletter this week, we are on track to have our first trillionaire by 2027, and that person could spend 15,844 dollars every second of every day, for an entire year, end severe hunger on January 16th, and still have 500 billion left over.

Like the rich man in the parable, when one gets to the point where they have no idea what to do with their fortune save for buying larger containers to hold it...grain barns, megayachts, football teams, jets...they've indeed lost sight of the bigger picture. They've lost sight of the needs of the world. Indeed, as the parable warns, "this very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?"

So what do we do about it?

I want to be careful here.

There will be thousands of sermons preached today that lead a congregation toward the conclusion that the message we're getting is "you can't take it with you...so be generous with your assets...especially to the church".

This is most boldly magnified through those adhering to the prosperity gospel, a set of teachings arising in the 1950s that assert financial blessing and physical well-being are God's true will, and the most faithful believers will be rewarded many times over. How to truly demonstrate that faith?

Well...This morning's offering will be given, and received.

These teachings have guided the healing revivals of the 50s and 60s, the televangelist boom of the 80s, and more recently, the megachurch and internet ministries of folks like Joel Osteen, Paula White, and Kenneth Copeland.

In a recent lesson on abundance, Copeland delivered a parable of his own, stating that "A janitor could have a jet". When asked to further explain, he strangely elaborated that "a janitor might not need a jet during the week, but if he's spreading the world of Jesus on the weekends, he shouldn't be doing it on a janitor's salary".

Given that Copeland himself maintains an 18,000 square foot legally registered parsonage appraised at over 10 million dollars, a fleet of luxury cars and boats and three private jets, it seems this modern parable might be a bit of a self-revealing take on his concept of servant leadership.

After all, according to Copeland, "it's a Biblical thing...you can't talk to God while flying commercial."

With the example set by Copeland and his peers, we're right back where we started...having nothing to imagine doing with our excess other than to find new ways to store it, just this time in the name of God.

Now this week's Gospel reading makes it abundantly clear that Jesus, speaking with the authority of God, isn't on board with this. "*Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed, for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.*"

So, it's that easy, right?

Billionaires should do a much better job of giving back, prosperity teachings lead us down a dangerous path, don't hoard money or resources, now let's have communion.

I wish it was that easy, but from what we just heard from folks, and what I know of the heart and soul of this congregation, if we left it there, as many commentaries on this reading honestly do, your overwhelming response would be "ok...tell me something I don't know".

Where's the challenge, where's the opportunity for personal growth, and where's the struggle through which we see the good news? How is this gospel speaking to me?

The reality is that in this lesson, Jesus invites a deeper relationship with God only after exposing both human greed and our anxiety about money. Not our anxiety about Elon Musk or Kenneth Copeland's money, our own anxiety.

Thinking and talking about money is hard, especially in the concept of faith.

When I first started coming to the Old Meeting House after a relatively unchurched upbringing, the offering was the toughest part for me. Not having a full grasp of just what doing the work of God looked like, the idea that we would offer cash as a gift to something bigger than all of us was offputting. It seemed as disingenuous to me as one of Copeland's

offerings, in which donors hold their cash above their head, and pray for it to multiply through God's will, before turning it over to him.

I suppose I was looking for a more down-to-earth call, something like

“due to the the come-as-you-are approach to worship, our business model is best served by requesting donations at the time the most people are gathered together. Please consider helping us to maintain our financial commitment to justice in action, as well as to keep our lights on, our buildings heated, and yes, our pastor paid.”

And while that approach might be more factually accurate, I realize in thinking that way, I was missing where the actual gift did exist. We say a prayer of gratitude for the capacity and the privilege of giving, and we mean it. The actual offering before God is a commitment to resist greed. It's up to all of us to do our homework on how to get there.

Yes, this church, like all institutions, has some actual tangible financial needs to meet, but more importantly, we choose each week, over and over again to live into this teaching because we care about something bigger than ourselves.

Because we struggle each week with looking at our own budgets though the lens of worldwide need, we are practicing active discipleship, following the teachings of a different type of king, a king who gave away his entire life, so we wouldn't have to.

It's different for all of us.

As a church with an active justice in action ministry, we choose to not give a huge amount of money to some of the UCC's giving programs, not because we are greedy, but because we have our own plan.

Similarly, there are people here today who limit the role of the Old Meeting House in your overall ability to give, not out of greed, but because you have discerned other priorities.

Our doors are open to people who cannot give, and for whom might need the gift of coffee hour as breakfast might just be true salvation.

That's just fine.

As I've added to our call to the offering, the biggest gift of all is your presence, in this space, working through this stuff together for the benefit of humanity. The offering before God is not simply funding a house of worship, it's demonstrating a rejection of greed as part of the spiritual core of who we are.

Yes, life would be a lot better if the billionaires would just figure out how to step up, but to say so ignores the challenge of how they rose to financial power to begin with.

The parable of the rich fool, and our own lived experience, offer a sharp criticism that once you've reached the point of building bigger barns for the sole purpose of storing wealth, or wanting nothing other than a bigger boat for yourself, it's too late.

In 2021, the world's richest man challenged the UN world food program that if they could show him, with clear, open accounting, how 6 billion dollars could make a permanent dent in world hunger, he'd donate it.

They did, and he changed his mind and moved on.

The harsh and beautiful truth is that even though it's not fair, we are called to keep this Gospel message alive, to lead others away from the type of thinking that creates billionaires with that much power over humanity in the first place.

Gandhi puts it this way: *“I suggest that we are thieves in a way. If I take anything that I do not need for my own immediate use and keep it I thief it from somebody else. I venture to suggest that it is the fundamental law of Nature, without exception, that Nature produces enough for our wants from day to day, and if only everybody took enough for himself and nothing more, there would be no pauperism in this world, there would be no more dying of starvation in this world. But so long as we have got this inequality, so long we are thieving.”*

The good news is the struggle.

By wondering if we are thieves, even when we're deciding whether or not to share the last \$20 in our pocket with someone who needs to feed their child, we are ensuring that we are not.

By wrestling with our own anxiety, guilt and awkwardness over our own finances, we are slowly leading, by example, toward a society in which excess wealth isn't so glorified and accepted that it becomes the only tool for solving the problem it created in the first place.

A society where leaving zucchini on the front porch for all to take is more admirable than a megayacht.

Little by little, hard choice by hard choice, we are on the right path...

may our abundance may be for their need, and their need become our abundance.