

Marcia McFee wrote, “The end of the movie ‘It’s a Wonderful Life’ is a joyful celebration of community and generosity and George Bailey’s thankfulness is infectious.” **“At the heart of our relationship to money is living and giving with gratitude – whether the assets we have to give are monetary, or our own capital of time and energy for the sake of the human family.”**

An example of this “living and giving with gratitude” is found in our Scripture Reading. It is surprising but the Mother Church in Jerusalem practiced economic communism. However, I am not suggesting we follow that part of their example of “living and giving with gratitude”. The part of their example, we are called to follow is found in **verses 33-34a, which the Revised Standard Version literally translated, “And with great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. There was not a needy person among them ...”** The Mother Church powerfully practiced testifying to what God had done through the Resurrection of Jesus and responded by giving abundantly, so all of the members of their community had what they needed – “There was not a needy person among them”. They benefited greatly from God’s Grace and their grateful giving and living.

The example of the Mother Church in Jerusalem demonstrates the truth of what Jesus said in the Gospel of John in the quote we have been using as the theme text at the beginning of each of our bulletins during this Worship Series. **Jesus said in John 10:10b, “I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.”** The Mother Church had “great grace upon them all”. They were living the abundant life. If the Romans had not destroyed Jerusalem in 70 A.D., Christianity might have been very different today. Nevertheless, the Jerusalem Mother Church’s “living and giving with gratitude” is a Wonder Full example and something we are both called and encouraged to follow.

Indeed, the emphasis of this “A Wonder-Full Life” Worship Series goes well with our Consecrating Stewards’ Theme, which also comes from the Gospel of John. **Our Theme for our Consecrating Stewards Program comes from John 14:6a when “Jesus answered, ‘I Am the Way’”.** Jesus’ Way fulfills what “Integrating Money and Meaning: Practices for a Heart-Centered Life”, our resource book for this Worship Series, meant when the author included in its title, “Practices for a Heart-Centered Life”. **The Heart of Jesus and his Way is Agape Love. It was beautifully described by the Apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 12:31-13:3:**

*“And yet I will show you the most excellent way.*

*If I speak in the tongues of men or of angels,*

*but do not have agape love,*

*I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal.*

*If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains,*

*but do not have agape love,*

*I am nothing.*

*If I give all I possess to the poor and give over my body to hardship that I may boast,*

*but do not have agape love,*

*I gain nothing.”*

God’s “Agape Love” for All Humanity was most clearly revealed in the Sending of God’s Son – the Word – the Way into the world to prove God’s Love and Forgiveness for All People! That was accomplished by means of Jesus’ Birth, Life, Public Ministry, Death, and Resurrection. Jesus Christ manifested God’s Self-Giving and Sacrificial Agape Love for Everyone through his entire life, especially his torturous Death. Jesus showed agape love as he ministered to All People, especially to the outcasts, the rejected, and the hated of society. **Our “courageous vision” – our calling is to follow and imitate Jesus as the Way and his Way of agape love – sharing God’s Forgiveness, Healing, Invitation, Welcome, and New Life!** Today, we focus on how our financial practices are an important part of our Call to the Way of Jesus Christ.

Our Threshold Moment stated, “In this fourth week of our series, we look with an attitude of gratitude at the ways our practices of dealing with money can be transformed because we have brought the subject out of the shadows and into the light. In doing so, we have opened ourselves to a greater sense of community, just as the early Christians did when they worked together to support one another.” ... **“This ‘investment’ of ourselves in beloved community increases our constant and enduring hope and gratitude.”**

Our resource book for this Worship Series, also states, “Through spiritual practice our posture will begin to take on the shape of empathy, compassion, and a sense of interconnectedness. Our choices and relationships will necessarily take on

this shape as well. Most of us by now have heard the old story the grandmother tells her grandchild. She describes for the child the two wolves fighting inside the young girl. One wolf is filled with fear, anger, resentment, pride, envy, and greed. The other is filled with serenity, harmony, joy, kindness, and generosity. When the child asks which will win, the grandmother says, “The one you feed.” **“Spiritual practice is feeding that part of ourselves that is oriented toward serenity, harmony, truth, compassion, gratitude, love, and joy.”**

Further, the author also wrote, “Adding money to our spiritual path will help us more easily inhabit the money system skillfully, even sacredly, without being undone by it. We will start to live with less need to protect our power or live in the house of scarcity and fear. ... Our own hearts are the heart of the whale. Our path is the journey to that heart — a place of joy, meaning, and true wealth.”

**When we include giving back to God for God’s Purposes in our management and use of our money, we move more toward the fulfillment of Jesus being our Way – the Ultimate Manifestation of God’s Agape Love for us and All People.** As we do that, our spiritual lives will deepen – our New Faith Relationship with God will grow and become more meaningful. Being more committed financially to God’s Purposes, especially through this congregation, is an important aspect of our “living and giving with gratitude” – fulfilling “The Way” and our “courageous vision”.

As we move swiftly towards our **Consecration and Thanksgiving Sunday, next Sunday, November 10th**, let’s focus on how we can more fully follow “The Way” of Life revealed through Jesus Christ – more completely fulfill our united “courageous vision”. Embodying agape love – self-giving and sacrificial love is our “courageous vision” put into “spiritual practice”. Our main question for next Sunday, Consecration and Thanksgiving Sunday, is **“How will we manifest our courageous vision and spiritual practice financially?”**

In the Youth/Young Adult Skit last Sunday the conclusion was, “Doing the right thing, being kind, gentle, patient, and good, faithful, self-controlled, and generous are always good seeds to plant that will be harvested in abundance.” **“We need to plant our best seeds and tend our lives as best we can – to be generous in thought, word, and deed – to love our neighbors – no matter how we’re treated in return. Because in the end, God has promised us: What we sow, we will reap abundantly.”**

Our Stewardship Video, “Power of Giving” challenged us to make sure we are giving joyfully – as an act of Worship out of our gratitude and as a contribution to the Heart of Christ. **Yes, our “courageous vision” is to follow the Heart of Christ – to live his Way.**

Following Jesus’ example enables us to deepen and grow in our Trust in and Faith Relationship with God. Thus, living the generous Way of Christ not only benefits this congregation but, also, helps transform the world. It enriches everyone with whom we share God’s Agape Love, Forgiveness, Service, Invitation, Welcome, and Generosity – the example of the life Jesus lived and described as “The Way”.

Through the Faith – Promise Process, of which we will be led next Sunday, Consecration and Thanksgiving Sunday, November 10th, during the Worship Celebration by our Guest Steward, Rev. Peter Nichols, a retired UCC Pastor, **we seek to move out of scarcity thinking and to live “The Way” – Abundant Agape Love and Abundant Life – the New Life in Jesus Christ.** We do that by, perhaps, by making greater Faith – Promise Commitments of which the specific amounts and the specific identity of the individuals or households promising those amounts in 2020 are known only to themselves and to our Divine Parent. Further, our program is taking place in a spirit of Worship, during the Sundays leading up to and including the Consecration and Thanksgiving Sunday Worship Celebration. **This process and program focus on the need of each of us to grow in and deepen our New Faith Relationship with God, one another, and all people.** We do that by our making a greater commitment to being more fruitful and agape loving in our support of our Divine Parent’s Purposes – The Way of Jesus, through Round Grove United Church, United Church of Christ. We do that instead of emphasizing the church’s need for money.

Because the townspeople and George’s friends were generous and rallied to his cause almost everyone joined in the celebration of George’s deliverance and the saving of the Building and Loan – all except for Potter. **Indeed, as George’s brother toasted George, he really was “the richest man in town”.**

We are also part of a great celebration in the midst of all the faithful and grateful giving of the People of the Way because Jesus Christ has come that we might have life and have it abundantly. **Let’s live Abundant Love, Abundant Life, Abundant Generosity – the New Faith Relationship with God and with All People, as we follow the Way of Jesus and live the Wonder Full Life! Amen.**