

The Heart is For Giving

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Revelation 12:1-8

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God protects the mythical Mary and Christ from being devoured by the Red Dragon, symbolizing Rome, who is defeated by the angel Michael. It is our job as Christians to follow in his footsteps to challenge the dragon to a duel.

An ancient image of wealth and power that comes down through our culture is that of the dragon. In the Far East the dragon is a symbol of vital energy, "chi", along with inner wild wisdom. In the Game of Thrones, House of the Dragons, it's all about massive weaponry and war. In traditional legends, the dragon is a feared symbol of greed and secret desire. This dragon is portrayed as a huge, fire-breathing reptile, underground in a secret cave, gloating atop an enormous pile of gold, silver and jewelry - protecting its treasure trove. JRR Tolkien has a wonderful description of the dragon, Smaug, in his book [The Hobbit](#). Smaug was intimately familiar with every last item within his hoard, and instantly noticed the theft of a relatively inconsequential cup by Bilbo Baggins. According to Tolkien, his rage was the kind which *"is only seen when rich folk that have more than they can enjoy, lose something they have long had, but never before used or wanted."* This dragon symbolizes greed, the impulse within each of us to grasp and horde what we desire, to furtively yearn for things outside of our grasp, but once we own them, hide them deep down in our secret place of desire.

Each of us has a dragon within us, a dragon that wants to hold on tight to everything we own, to pull it down into our deep, dark cave complete with burglar alarms and insurance policies, guarding it with our guns and rage. A dragon does not share; it hoards. The dragon will ravage and kill with a vengeance, rather than give anything up.

A story illustrates this dragon of desire inside of us. Once a long time ago, the king's barber was walking between villages on a path through the woods. As he passed a large oak tree, his eye saw something sparkle from inside the cracked trunk. He turned off the path and crawled into the tree. There inside were six jars - and inside they were filled with gold coins.

He was ecstatic. His wife and children lived in a modest house in the country. Now he would be rich! He went to the nearest farm and hired a cart, and carried his treasure home, where he buried the jars in the floor of his barn. He told no one about it, not even his wife. All he did was to dream about how wealthy he had become.

Now five of the jars were filled to the brim with coins, but the sixth was not quite full. He decided he wanted to fill that jar to the top. He began to work more hours in his barbershop in town - burning oil lamps until midnight hoping to get more customers. He got several more - and he saved all that he could, scrimping on food for he and his family - selling some furniture. But it seemed that no matter how many coins he put into the jar, it never became full. He worked harder and harder - and his wife also went out to sell cakes and pies. But still the jar would not get full. He became more and more tired, his eyes grew sunken, and he became thin and worn.

One day he was cutting the king's hair, and he saw the king looking at him strangely. "Tell me," said the king. "Are you all right?" "Well, your majesty," replied the barber, "it seems that no matter how hard I work, I can never save enough. Someday I hope to have enough to retire, but now I have to work harder and harder." The king again looked at him oddly. "You didn't, by any chance, find six jars of gold in the forest, did you?" he asked. The barber looked down at his feet. "I did once," said the king. "And I became obsessed with filling the sixth jar full, hoarding all the gold I had, taxing my people mercilessly - but no matter how much I put in, it was never full. Let me give you some advice - give it back. It is magic gold - cursed. Give it back." The barber

took his advice - and found he was much, much happier living without the obsession of his jars of gold.

The dragon within us wants to fill those jars with coins, to hoard our silver, to sit on it all. But, as this story tells us, that doesn't bring us happiness - in fact it can simply make us lonely and obsessed. We can end up sitting like serpents in the darkness of our caves - without friends, without family - living only for ourselves.

I heard an interview once with the writer Ann Landers. She had been writing her column for over 40 years, and she developed a fair amount of wisdom. The interviewer asked her what are the most serious problems we face as a society today. She answered slowly, "Well, drugs; and too much television." And then she paused, "And I think we have become too obsessed with things, too concerned with owning things, and not concerned enough about other values like caring, friendship, being helpful to others, and being useful. These are what make life really worthwhile."

This is the way of life Jesus points us to create. Jesus teaches us a new kind of community. Rather than living by a sharp code of vendetta, or an eye-for-an-eye reptilian kind of justice. Jesus calls us to a way of living based on mutual respect and non-retaliation. He calls us not to hide our own food or money away, but to share with others in the community. He calls us to create a new kind of community in which we treat others as we want to be treated ourselves. This is what will make us most satisfied in our lives. The more we can open our hands, and our hearts and give, the closer we are to the way of God. It brings about fullness of heart - a sense of joyfulness and satisfaction. The more we give, the more our hearts grow larger.

Most of us are ambivalent about money. It is great to have. It can give us not only things we need, but also things we just want for the fun of it. It leads to a full life - theatre, art, restaurants, travel, freedom, and security. But it also comes with lots of strings - hard work, taxes, mortgages, bank accounts, the fear of theft, the threat of bankruptcy, the responsibility to manage it with care. We balance between the desire to hoard it, to lock it all away; or to spend it freely, to give it away, to use it abundantly. Most of us live somewhere in the middle - ambivalently.

Zen Master Layman Pang from ancient China is said to have piled all of his possessions in a boat every few years, row it out to the center of a lake, and sink it. Needless to say, his wife and children were not pleased. Possessions are things we also wrestle with – deciding to keep them or get rid of them.

The point of our faith is not to give because we have to. It does not say "You dragons, give up your gold!" Dragons will never give up their gold willingly, without a fight. The point that Jesus makes is that we give out of a fullness of heart - we give out of the joy of giving, because it helps us spiritually, it leads us to be closer to God. The antidote to the dragon's poison is a joyful heart, it is the faith of the disciples. We are asked to transform ourselves from dragons into disciples - from those who sit on our wealth and spew fire at anyone who tries to get it; into apostles who go out to give of ourselves, rejoicing.

Disciples go out without "gold or silver or copper in their belts, no bag for the journey, or two tunics, or sandals, or a staff." Rather than hoarding and guarding all that glitters, we are to share and seek the good of the other.

Barbara Brown Taylor explains it this way: *"The hardest spiritual work in the world is to love the neighbor as the self- to encounter another human being not as someone you can use, change, fix, help, save, enroll, convince or control, but simply as someone who can spring you from the prison of yourself, if you will allow it. All you have to do is recognize another you 'out there' – your other self in the world – for whom you may care as instinctively as you care for yourself. To become that person, even for a moment, is to understand what it means to die to your self."* As we open our hearts and give of ourselves – as we treat others as persons of value; then the Way is revealed. Jesus' Kin-dom is made real.

As you know, we are in the midst of our Stewardship Campaign for this year, asking our members and friends to support the church and its work with financial pledges. You should have received a pledge card and today we will bless pledges from those of you who have submitted yours. This "Imagine Together" Stewardship Campaign is a master class for us to look at the place of money and things in our lives and imagine something new. How much do our possessions control us? Are we dragging our wealth down into our dragon-lair, or acting more like our Savior, feeding

thousands? Truthfully, we live somewhere in between. Balancing between sensible freedom and generosity.

If we each give our share big-heartedly, then we will still have enough and more. Let us share the gold of our resources with joy, the way Jesus shared the gift of his very blood. Let us move beyond our dragon-like clutching - and move out in faith to become disciples – people who give rather than just receive. Amen.