

# Heavenly Treasure

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Mark 10:17-31

October 13, 2024  
Glen Ridge Congregational

Dr. Robin Wall Kimmerer, a botanist and member of the Citizen Potawatomi Nation, helps us better understand gratitude. In her reflection, "[Lessons of the Serviceberry](#)," Dr. Kimmerer noted that the Potawatomi word "berry" provides the root word of "gift." She explained, *"In naming the plants who shower us with goodness, we recognize that these are gifts from our plant relatives, manifestations of their generosity, care, and creativity. When we speak of these not as things or products or commodities, but as gifts, the whole relationship changes. I can't help but gaze at them, cupped like jewels in my hand, and breathe out my gratitude."*

So often we look at berries – or other foods – as commodities and not as gifts – and see them for what they cost, not how amazing they are as creations of the universe. We

tend to treat other gifts: breath, trees, stars, caterpillars, rain, our bodies, our minds, in similar ways – as objects we take for granted and ignore, unless something goes awry.

Dr. Kimmerer sees gratitude expansively. *"Gratitude is so much more than a polite thank you. It is the thread that connects us in a deep relationship, simultaneously physical and spiritual, as our bodies are fed and spirits nourished by the sense of belonging, which is the most vital of foods. Gratitude creates a sense of abundance, the knowing that you have what you need. In that climate of sufficiency, our hunger for more abates and we take only what we need, in respect for the generosity of the giver."*

We hear a story about money in scripture this morning, about a rich man who runs up to Jesus, kneels before him and asks him what to do to inherit eternal life. Jesus gives him a simple answer: follow the commandments. The man responds that he has kept them from his youth. Jesus looks at him, and he 'loved' him – probably meaning that he saw his intense sincerity and religious faith. Then Jesus pushes him to take one more step – one that he himself had taken, along with many of his disciples – to sell all his possessions and to give the money to the poor, to invest in his spiritual life. When the man heard this, he was shocked. Shocked! Yes, it is a shocking demand – one that seems unreasonable and beyond belief. How could anyone fulfill this demand? The man hung his head and walked away.

How would you respond? I would like to think that I would throw it all to the wind and follow Jesus. But truthfully, I'd probably be that guy. What about retirement? What about my family? What if I got sick or needed a place to live or enough food? What if my daughter faces a crisis? What if the economy tanked or climate change hit hard?

We live in a strange world, don't we? Boom and bust. We make money and then it flows through our fingers and disappears like water through a sieve. And yet it is so essential to our lives. How could we survive without it? It is the source of so many of our worries. Most stories in the news are about money – about jobs and employment figures and rate of foreclosure or home sales or the roller coaster of the stock market. Up and down, boom or bust. It is dizzying. Money has a very strong pull on our lives.

The disciples knew this. After this interchange, they exclaimed, "Then who can be saved?" They realized how unlikely it would be for anyone to rise to this challenge. Jesus says it's about as likely as a camel to go through the eye of a needle. But Jesus adds: *"For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible."* (Mk 10:27) As I mentioned in my sermon last week, Jesus works from God's perspective, not ours. He lives "on earth as it is in heaven." He encourages us to widen our vision to

include God's hope for us. And Jesus loves us enough to understand our limits and to offer us grace and forgiveness, even if we're not spiritual superheroes.

Jesus warns that the danger of wealth is that it makes us believe that we do not need God. He says, *"the rich have already received their reward."* It is so easy to put money in the place in our hearts reserved for God. It becomes an idol for us, a god that we obey beyond all else, and it is a tormenting god, bringing us high and then taking us low. Money may reward us, but it can also destroy us; a fickle god that has no love for us, only greed. And it can blind us to the rest of life.

*A old Jewish story goes like this: A rich but stingy man once came to his rabbi to ask for his blessing. The rabbi suddenly arose, took him by the hand, and led him to the window looking out on the street.*

*"Tell me – what do you see?" asked the rabbi.*

*"I see people," answered the puzzled rich man.*

*Then the rabbi drew him before a mirror.*

*"What do you see now?" he again asked him.*

*"I see myself," answered the man bewildered.*

*"Now, my son, let me explain to you the meaning of my two questions. The window is made of glass – as is also the mirror – only the glass of the mirror has a veneer of silver on it. When you look through plain glass you see people. But no sooner do you cover it with silver when you stop seeing others and see only yourself."*

In our prosperous age, the danger is that we can be blinded by our own wealth, our worries about money, our personal concerns. Money is so central it is difficult to see beyond it. So where does this leave us? It leaves us seeking perspective. Jesus offers this. He teaches us that in faith we can find all we need, so we do not have to be so worried, especially about money.

In one of the strangest stories in the bible, when it came time to pay taxes, Jesus instructs Peter to go catch a fish and that he would find a coin in the fish's mouth. Yup, there it was. He used it to pay the tax. In another version of the story, he asked whose face was on the coin. Caesar's. Jesus' reply: "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's." The point is that God is bigger than and beyond the economy. It's not all that is. And God provides. Hard to imagine, but true. And if we worship money and not God, we will come to regret it. If we worship and obey only money, then we will find ourselves with only the market as our god. So, Jesus cautions us not to take money too seriously, or too greedily, but to give it freely.

Our worries about our own finances and the future stifle generosity. Yet being generous can actually ease our worries and open us to connections in the world. Our giving can make a great difference, not only to the people around us, but even to our own hearts. Giving to our church eases our souls, teaching us open-hearted grace that calms our fears. Here's a story from India that illustrates this.

There was once a poor, penniless beggar, who sat in the streets of an Indian town, day after day, begging passers-by for a little rice. At night, he would sleep on his mat, with only a few old rags to protect him against the cold night air. Most days, he would be given enough rice to make himself a small meal at night, and enough coppers to buy a little firewood to cook the rice. And so his life continued, day after day – until one day, he heard that the emperor was coming to the town to make a state visit.

"Surely," he thought, 'the emperor is a good and saintly man. He will give me good gifts. He will not pass me by with a mere handful of rice.' So, the next day, he made sure that he was sitting on the route where the emperor was going to pass by.

Soon, the sound of the imperial procession was heard, and the beggar placed himself beside the road. As the emperor's coach approached, he was about to step out and beg for alms, when to his great surprise, the emperor himself got out of his coach, came up to the beggar, greeted him warmly and humbly, and asked the beggar for a little gift of rice.

The beggar was shocked and deeply disappointed. He, after all, was a poor man, struggling to survive and dependent on the gifts of others. Yet here was the rich and powerful emperor begging a little rice from the poorest of the poor. He couldn't possibly refuse the emperor's request, so very reluctantly, he counted out five grains of rice from the meager supply in his bowl, and gave them to the emperor, who received them graciously, thanked the beggar and went on his way.

That night, the beggar began to prepare his meal. As he cleaned the rice, he noticed something shining in among the grains. Ahh! there was a nugget of gold among the rice. And another. And another. He sifted through the rice with the utmost care, and to his amazement he discovered five nuggets of gold. Five. And no more. He thought back to his encounter with the emperor. For each of the five grains of rice he had so reluctantly given to the emperor, he now had a nugget of gold. The emperor had returned his grudging gift with its equivalent in gold.

"How mean and foolish I have been," he said to himself. "How I wish I had given the emperor every last grain of rice I possessed!"

(p. 87 100 Wisdom Stories)

The lesson we learn today is that as we give, we also receive. Letting go of worries of scarcity can bring us a perspective of greater abundance. When we trust we

will have our daily bread, then we can more easily offer bread to others. Perhaps this is an alternative to our culture of go-go, grab-grab, get what you can while the getting is good. Our church will soon begin its annual stewardship campaign, so that we can practice this art, this way of living by practicing generosity. When we do, our lives become more full, more light, and more free, a gift to be given.

Let it be so. Amen.