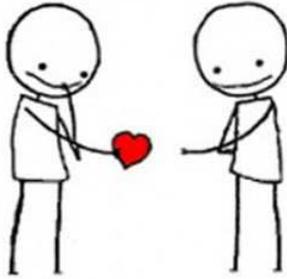


## Paying It Forward (reading: Luke 12:32-40)



The Scripture reading from Luke we just heard picks up where we left off last week. And last week it picked up where we left off the week before *that*. What we're hearing is a long speech by Jesus, chopped up in smaller sections. What Jesus is doing here is what we'd now call a form of "theology one on one". Or "confirmation class for the 1st century". Basically, Jesus is talking to his followers about what it means to follow him; what is involved (and not involved), and what to expect (and not to expect).

Last week he gave us the parable of the rich fool, explaining what our priorities in life should be. The week before he talked about the importance of prayer and intimacy with God, and how to pray.

This week it's about the brass ring that caps it all: God's kingdom. Jesus explains that ultimately, everything we do and say and pray is for one purpose only: making God's kingdom a reality.

But what *is* God's kingdom? Jesus dropped a first hint about this mysterious realm two weeks ago in the prayer he teaches his followers: "Our Father (Dad), your kingdom come on earth..." That was the focal point of Jesus' entire ministry: making God's kingdom a reality, and speaking out against those people and those forces who are blocking it from happening.

To understand what Jesus is talking about we need to know that for him it was already happening. It's not something far away or in the future; for Jesus, God's kingdom is already unfolding, bubbling up in the strangest and most unexpected places, defying all odds. That was a big part of the Good News he was spreading. The sad news was and still is that he realized we just don't get it. We're looking for it in all the wrong places; our brains are conditioned to think of a kingdom or a realm as something that is put in place by a government, or a king or a president at the top of the hierarchy, trickling down until it reaches us. A top-down structure.

So Jesus says: forget everything you think you know about it. For starters, he says, it's all about sharing, about being there for each other - without exception. And then he give us a very concrete example: take money, he says. Don't hoard it, don't sit on it while others are suffering: use it for good. Money can be a powerful economic tool to bring God's kingdom a little closer.

And as always, Jesus turns things upside-down. He says, it's not by saving your money and amassing things & stuff that you grow your capital - it's by using it in such a way that everyone benefits - not just you, but *everyone*.

And in our day and age where everything is driven by the bottom line and the almighty dollar, that simple statement really makes us think. How do we spend our money?

When we buy, say, our shirts and jeans and shoes, do we think about who benefits and who suffers? About two months ago, a garment factory in Bangladesh collapsed, killing dozens of workers. Workers who for \$1.25 a day and in dangerous work conditions manufactured shirts and shoes for us, so we can buy them cheap.

When we put away money for our RRSP, do we think about who will benefit of all that money and who will not? Most banks now offer ethical funds to invest in, maybe something to consider.

When we book a cheap flight for a vacation or to visit relatives or friends, do we think about our carbon footprint that this flight will leave behind - and are we willing to pay a little bit extra into a carbon offset program that most airlines now offer?

Just 3 simple examples of how the way we spend our money can *do* harm - or *repair* harm. And Jesus tells us: yes, making those choices can cost you some money in this world. But every time you do it, you are building up capital in the government of God. You're bringing God's kingdom a bit closer. For Jesus, God's kingdom is very concrete and part of our every-day life and choices.

And then he talks about our readiness for God's government, God's realm. He realizes that most of us, most of the time, are *not* ready for it. We are caught by the way our world is organized, and we think that that is the only way things can be. It's easy to get discouraged by the constant news of warfare, greed, violence. It makes you feel the world is going to hell in a hand basket, and there's nothing we can do about it; all those problems are just too big, they're outside of our control.

We all remember the horrific shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School, in Dec. 2012. A 20-year old kid entered the school armed to his teeth with automatic rifles, to randomly kill 20 young children and 6 adults before killing himself. The word "evil" doesn't even begin to describe this horrific act. Of course it triggered all kinds of negative responses: fear, mistrust, revenge, hatred. All that bad news made the news for weeks, making us feel powerless and hopeless, asking ourselves what the world is coming to.

But what never made the news was a brief video on YouTube, posted by another 20-year old student, Matt Hoff, only a few weeks after the shooting. His video commemorated the 26 victims, but in an unusual way. What he and 2 of his friends did was they went out spreading kindness to total strangers. They paid for a homeless lady's subway ticket. They paid for the person behind them at the drive-thru. They bought a sad little girl a happy balloon. They opened doors for people for an hour at a supermarket. They left thank-you notes and home-baked cookies at the police station. They returned stranded grocery carts to where they belonged. They picked up garbage on the sidewalk and put it in bins. They took a homeless man out for lunch and listened to his story. They put quarters in all the candy dispensers they came across. They gave flowers to someone who looked like she needed them. They gave out free hugs. And so on and so forth.

Matt and his friends said, the people who got killed, especially the children, were gifts to all of us. Now that they are no longer with us, it's up to us to pay these gifts forward. Their video ends with the words: "Now it's your turn. Go out into the world and make someone's day." Matt and his friends had the courage to laugh in the face of fear and death and revenge, and they lit a little light for us to follow. By spreading random acts of kindness, and instantly changing people's lives.

Jesus says, "Yes, terrible things are happening. But they cannot stop the government of God from being a reality. God's realm is happening all the time, right here and right now." And he encourages us to do away with the blinkers we all have, and to broaden our vision and look in the right places. And if we do, we'll see how God's Spirit is constantly creating these little pockets of life the way God intends it to be lived; not enforced from the top down, like we are used to, but rising up from the bottom, and always in the most unexpected places. And whenever we catch it happen, it's up to us to be ready to respond and to act on it. To take the baton and run with it.

We don't know exactly what God's kingdom will be like or when it will be fully established. But we do know that it is God's plan for this creation, and that's it is based on all-inclusive love and acceptance. We also know it's a work in progress, and that we are called to be active participants in that process. We are called to pay randomly forward all the good things God is giving us. Not an easy thing to do, says Jesus, but our reward is so worth it: a wealth that is much, much more valuable than anything this world can ever offer. Amen.

(Matt Hoff's video can be viewed here: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=55XZT6AGJ1Q>, or on Pinegrove U.C.'s Facebook page.)