

Sermon: Tomatoes for the future

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There is an old story about a man who was dying might suffice here.

He called his family in and said to them he believed they were wrong that he could take it with him so sell everything and when he died they were to bury him with the cash. They thought he was crazy but they did it and he died and went up to the hereafter and there the angels met him at the gate and he said, here I am, and here is all my money...they told him cash didn't matter at all they only took receipts...

That is an old folk tale. Here is another story...

There was an old woman who had what she needed.

She had more than she needed.

In fact she could never use it all.

Her children had grown and passed on.

She was so old now she had seen more than she felt she should have.

Her grandchildren didn't exist because her children never had them.

She loved so many children as a teacher, she saw them grow and graduate and go on to live their own lives.

Now she watched as her tomatoes grew and some made it to the table and to her neighbors table, others like some of her students fell to nothing. But she thought a long time about that and watching her tomatoes on days she couldn't hoist her body out to the garden they fell. And as she watched them drop like slow rain drops she realized they weren't wasted if they didn't end up in a salad or stuffed and cooked in the oven. She realized that what they were doing was trying to seed the next generation by planting themselves in the self-nourishing fertilized sack of rotting tomato. And that was just fine with her.

Her neighbors would say she let the drops go to waste. Mr. Davis who came by once a week from church and made coffee and mostly talked about his life would say she ought to collect

them. But she was through with ought's and shoulds, she was enjoying the notion that some of her crop would feed her friends and some the soil.

And one of those days when Mr. Davis was waxing on about something he had done once on a roof of a house somewhere in Georgia and how he wasn't hurt or even bruised by the fall, she had an idea. What if her life was like those tomatoes. Once she had fed many with her words and lessons. But now she was more like the fruit that hit the ground, could she nourish an environment for others to thrive in?

So she called her financial advisor. He said she was crazy and she would starve. She said she would get along and stop worrying about her. So with his help she sold everything. She sold her stocks, her bonds, the car she never drove, her books, art, furnishings, and her house...with one condition, that she could live in the garden shed which had room for a bed and had running water and that she could continue to grow her garden.

The family that bought the house agreed and moved in and she moved into the shed which was no bigger than a couple of closets but what did she need anyway. The children that moved in came to see her curious about the resident in their backyard and the garden. She showed them how to tie up the vines and prune the leaves so they let sun in. They helped her dig the soil and they brought her vegetables they harvested. They set up a farm stand out on their front lawn and she told them keep the money.

And her days passed by watching the garden grow and the children learn and lend a hand. The neighbors thought she had lost her mind and stopped coming by. Mr. Davis was uncomfortable in the cramped quarters and abandoned his soliloquy visits. And the woman enjoyed the peace of watching her garden grow even though she had sold everything she owned except two outfits and her little garden.

When she died the children and the family scattered her ashes in with the tomato plants knowing that was what she wanted. And then one day a few weeks later they got a box just addressed to the house no name on it. The box was light but they could feel there was something inside. So they took it to the dining room table. Inside the box there were thousands of letters all addressed to the old woman. They were thank you letters from children. They were from children who were students at a school in a rough part of the city where the woman had grown up. They wrote to say how grateful they were to the old woman for creating such a perfect school where they could learn how to grow plants and study math and English and peace studies.

You see the old woman had sold everything she owned and created this school where it was needed most. And she had passed on two charters that the school: 1) always have a garden to teach children how to grow things, and 2) that they use the curriculum she had developed over 50 years of teaching social studies on how to make peace.

The family read the thousands of letters, they wept through most of them, and laughed at pictures children drew of faces on tomatoes and larger than life stink bugs eating the corn. They decided that to honor the old woman they had to do one more thing. So they took the box of letters and stapled every single one of them on the walls and ceiling of the shed so the inside looked like a jewel box decorated by crayon drawings and cards of smiling vegetables and happy slugs. And then the family invited the school to come visit them. And one class at a time groups of 5 and 6 year olds came and marveled at the shed as they found their cards on the walls and they toured the garden and could name every plant. Then they sat on the porch and heard the story of the founder of their school who sold everything for them. So, Who got into heaven the man buried with his cash or the woman?

Trick question, we are Universalists...everyone gets into heaven...if you believe in it...but the real question is what heaven did with each person...peace of mind maybe...a feeling of accomplishment possibly...I would say the woman's heaven was that she knew she had done well for generations to come.

This story that I wrote for you begs the question what spiritual lessons did you learn about values and money and what do you owe? What is yours? What is yours to do?

I learned in my upper middle class family of six Christian Jewish Buddhist Unitarians that we gave away 10% of what we earned. How did that happen? We never were taught the traditional tithe. But my family always gave 5% to the Unitarian church that we belonged to and 5% to other organizations doing service and justice work we cared about. I learned this so firmly that I practice it today.

But more than the math of percentages what I learned was that while some of my earnings are mine, ultimately it's the receipts that make a difference. We don't have to go very far to know that generosity makes you feel better. We don't have to think too deeply to understand that what you do with your wealth is more important than the wealth itself.

University of Zurich did a study published in Time magazine where they found that those who had agreed to spend money on other people tended to make more generous decisions throughout the experiment compared to those who had agreed to spend on themselves. They also had more interaction between the parts of the brain associated with altruism and happiness, and they reported higher levels of happiness after the experiment was over.

The same study showed that generosity promotes health, reduces stress, makes you live longer and have lower blood pressure.

I have often pondered the effects of generosity on myself. I have had times when life was very difficult for me and once I called my father in the midst of a crisis and he told me, 'give something significant away.' And I did and it was the right medicine for that moment.

And I think those generous acts grow in us...the coffee you bring to your co-worker, the door held for a stranger, the donation to a cause not only make us feel good but they can change us and they live long after we do and altar the world in unexpected ways.

Think of this church. Last week I spread the ashes of a member of our church in our memorial garden. Let's call him Don. His wife and his daughter and I sprinkled him on plants and soil. He was a member here for many years before he and his wife moved to North Carolina. Don was always generous and in a quiet very solid way he helped this church. Another member of the church told me that he was the one they sent to canvass some of our most prickly lead donors. One of those we will call Gayle. I think one time Gayle hung up the phone on me because he thought I was about to ask him for something...but I also knew that Gayle could also be very kind, I enjoyed many moments with him....but if you took the image of the hardest person you know to ask something of you might picture Gayle.

So to send this quiet simple man who liked art and music and went to the same coffee shop everyday like clockwork to talk to Gayle every year was a surprise...Don was like a rock and would quietly ask for a pledge every year from a most boisterous and unsubtle member. Gayle would give yearly as one of largest donors we have. Don's wife and I laughed about this as we spread his sweet ashes in the garden mostly because she never knew that he did that....Don never told

her the important work he did for the church. His efforts lives on after both he and Gayle are gone. Both their estates made generous lasting gifts to the church this year.

This kind of thing has repeated itself over and over throughout the life of this church. When the founding member took a flying leap and came here to preach to the small gathered group of Unitarians he had no idea what would happen. I am guessing the people in his hometown in Mississippi told him he was crazy to leave and go to this 'outpost.' I call him courageous. And he and the first group of liberals in an illiberal age and place formed this church.

What did they know of us? I am sure they couldn't imagine us. But they raised money and paid their first minister in 1900 \$890/year (which adjusted for inflation would have been 25k today...no wonder they had five ministers in nine years...) but all the same, they gathered liberals and progressives throughout the area so we could be here.

In their own way they knew what we know, that the church is about the important work of:

Strangers meeting on common ground,

Facing the fear of those encounters,

Sharing abundance and generating a common responsibility

Dealing with conflict and giving life to something with a festive air, with drama, education, stories, and songs.

They knew and we know that a place like this draws us out and engages us in ways few others do, where mutuality is valued and opinions made audible and held accountable and vision is projected onto projects and classrooms and marches and protests and dialogue and budgets.

Here God's purpose is attempted at and we see it in our purpose to make justice and compassion real.

Here we run a marathon—while political campaigns you are invested in are sprints...important sprints...but here we is a marathon of hope and changing hearts and minds.

And here people are empowered from the youngest of us who dance in aisles during the prelude and question great concepts in classrooms to the eldest who with their presence remind us of what is important...receipts.

Today we ask you to pledge for 2019 and fulfill your pledge for 2018—a pledge is a promise to help create this place with us...a place of wise minds, truth speaking, loving hearts, and helping hands. If everyone here did what I do and a few of you do...and pledge 5% of your income...this place would explode with possibility. That could be your guide...And just giving what you can but making it feel good is also a guide.

What I'm saying today is that the giving is important. But what is more important is the impact of joining a mission to create revolutions of spirit that last longer than a political term, to combat despair, lift up those in need, march in streets for justice, and challenge the status quo with love. Will what we do embody a spirit that we pass down that says like the poet did today, *there is no one but us*.

There never has been because even as we look back and think on the founders of our church we are them but today. They could not imagine us but they gave so we could be here. Imagine with me the church a hundred years from now? Who will they be? It is almost impossible to do that, as it was for the founders, but that didn't stop them from planting the seeds of this place for us. They gave so we could be here today in all this splendor and joy and they knew if not for the responsibility do it for the joy.

We co-create this church every day we commit to it and today is the day to commit with pledges of love. We who with courage see its value and make it so can make a difference here today and everyday like a woman who gave everything to grow the lives of children to the founders of our church. We are the ones who can make this church thrive.

May it be so today and always, that we might have life and have it more abundantly. Amen