

“Developing Spiritual Muscle”

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Luke 6:37-38

“Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven; give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap; for the measure you give will be the measure you get back.”

Jeremiah 18:1-6, 11

The word that came to Jeremiah from the LORD: “Come, go down to the potter’s house, and there I will let you hear my words.” So I went down to the potter’s house, and there he was working at his wheel. The vessel he was making of clay was spoiled in the potter’s hand, and he reworked it into another vessel, as seemed good to him.

Then the word of the LORD came to me: Can I not do with you, O house of Israel, just as this potter has done? says the LORD. Just like the clay in the potter’s hand, so are you in my hand, O house of Israel.

Now, therefore, say to the people of Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem: Thus says the LORD: Look, I am a potter shaping evil against you and devising a plan against you. Turn now, all of you from your evil way, and amend your ways and your doings.

Have thine own way, Lord; have thine own way.
Thou art the Potter; I am the clay.
Mold me and make me after thy will,
While I am waiting, yielded and still.

God invites Jeremiah to leave his own familiar spaces and to learn about God by watching an artisan at work. God calls us all to the potter’s shed, to the weaver’s shop or the painter’s studio. In this unlikely setting, most of us are out of our element. We hear God in ways we would have missed in the safe confines of our own homes and churches.

In my first years as a teacher, I occasionally watched my friend Terri work with clay. I watched as she wedged the clay to prepare for shaping another day. I watched as she worked at the wheel to fashion bowls and other pieces. It was hard work. I recall her proudly showing off a “new” muscle after a particularly intense period of weeks.

In the opening pages of the Bible, we read that God shapes clay, sculpting and forming humankind from the earth, breathing life into this new creation. Now, in Jeremiah, we find that God did not fashion us once-for-all. Like clay before entering the kiln’s heat we are malleable, plastic. God can shape and reshape us. Like Terri, God labors over us to draw forth the best from us, assessing our character, revealing our strengths, working to remedy our flaws.

In the next few verses, which I didn’t ask our reader to read, we learn that God’s intentions for us are not fixed. They’re influenced by our choices. If we resist God’s leads toward good, then evil may come. When we are headed toward destruction through an absence of love, acceptance or

justice, that path may be changed when we turn to follow God's path more closely. Just as we may respond to God, so God responds to us.

Since September, we have looked at the path of spiritual growth, first using the Twelve Steps as a model, then looking at our finances. Today, we look further at how we grow spiritually through our stewardship of God's resources.

First, as we consider God-the-artist, I remind us that we are made in God's image. Each person comes with great potential for creativity as well as growth and happiness. In what ways do you use that potential in your life? Are you drawn to the arts? Sciences? Nature? Computers? Animals? Other people? As a student or an employee, do you gravitate to those tasks or fields that most suit your interests?

Are you living the life that God hopes for you? This is what stewardship is about.

I will be focusing on financial stewardship in the coming moments yet all that I say can be applied to your use of time, energy and other resources as well.

I mentioned, last week, in talking about ways we can work toward financial freedom that I'd talk about one more step this week. That step is *contentment*.

Scripture tells us that godliness is great when it's combined with contentment with what you already have. We didn't bring anything into the world and we can't take anything out of it (1 Timothy 6:6-7).

The psalmist writes, "The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it" (24:1). Do you really believe that or is it simply a nice sentiment? Whose was your intellect, your good looks or your resourcefulness before you were born? They belonged to God. Whose will they be when you die?

Maybe you say, "But in meantime, it's mine because I earned it." But who gives you the abilities that allow you to earn money? It all belongs to God. And if we are to grow spiritually, we need to learn to be good stewards of God's possessions.

But I said contentment. The apostle Paul writes, "I've learned to be content in any circumstance. I know the experience of being in need and of having more than enough; I have learned the secret to being content in any and every circumstance" (Philippians 4:11-12). He's content because he accepts the life he's living in God. He knows his life purpose and he's fulfilling it each day.

This is the secret of contentment. We trust God. We live the life God calls us to and we choose – sometimes each day, each moment – to accept that this is our good life. We work. We cultivate healthy relationships. We are content.

Choosing contentment allows us to live in financial freedom. I don't know who the fabled Joneses are or how they came to represent a standard of aspiration, but people who are content feel no pressure to keep up with them.

Materialism, on the other hand, wanting and buying more, whether we can afford it or not, will not bring inner peace. I've probably told you that when Jared was young, he played almost exclusively with superhero action figures. He had dozens of them but he was always saving, hoping, asking for one more.

During one conversation as we were driving toward Pulaski and then Green Bay, he told me about the new TNMT he was hoping to buy. Says I, “You know that the excitement won’t last. You’ll enjoy it but then you’ll just want another one.” He responded, “I know. But I want this one now.”

The problem is, of course, that whether it’s a Matchbox car or a Mustang, a cabin by the lake or a coffee mug, the new wears off. One definition of greed is “just a little bit more.” (Ron Blue)

How are we to attain lasting joy? Since acquiring more will not work, we do well to work at being content with what we have.

The wisdom writer tells us, “Whoever loves money never has enough” (Ecclesiastes 5:10).

Jesus tells us in today’s lesson “... give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap; for the measure you give will be the measure you get back.”

We need to take stock of the riches God has already given us. How well are you caring for those? Do you eat, sleep and exercise so as to care for the gift of your health? Do you avoid poisons in your home and your yard so as to care for the earthy gifts that we share? What portion of your time do you give to caring for others of God’s children? What portion of your finances?

At one of my first churches, a woman came up to me after church one fall Sunday. “You have to realize that most of us are on fixed incomes.” I was new to pastoring back then and didn’t have a ready answer. Today, I say that most of us are on fixed incomes. Except for those of us who work on commissions, almost everyone knows how much we’re going to have to work with in any given month. It’s simply a matter of deciding what we’re going to do with it.

For my part, I pay God first, 10% of my net pay. I don’t tithe now on my retirement savings; I’ll do that when I actually receive it. I started this when I first started teaching. I had to take a break while I was married, but started right up again afterward.

When we choose to grow as God calls us to grow, every decision is a spiritual decision. We recognize that the OT standard of tithing was meant as a minimum for giving. Instead of, “We give 10%, or 3% or 1%, to the church’s ministries. The rest is ours,” we ask, “What is God’s best way for us to use this money?” We’re meant to use it – to live ourselves and to share – but it’s not ours. Not really.

There’s actually a Christian finance book that contains a quitclaim page where readers are invited to sign off on all they own... All signed over to God. How would this change the ways you spend, save and earn? How would it affect your understanding of life?

God wants us to be content. To be satisfied with “enough” which is the opposite of scarcity. With contentment comes thankfulness, generosity, and forgiveness. We are the ones who determine if we’ll live in contentment though. We make this choice. God will guide us but only with our consent.

Will you lay your will on the potter’s wheel? Will you let yourself be formed and reformed, even now, shaped by the Potter’s hand?