



NEW SCANDINAVIA LUTHERAN CHURCH SEPTEMBER NEWSLETTER 2023

“Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. ³⁰But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!” Luke 15:29-30

It feels like the world is falling apart. The war in Ukraine continues. Turkey is still trying to recover from the two devastating earthquakes that hit there in May. Here in our country, communities continue to rebuild after ravaging tornados seen this summer. Communities continue to suffer the effects of excessive heat. Parts of our country are dealing with excessive water while others fight wildfires. I mean, how do you ignore what is happening in Maui, Washington, and southern California? And through it all, people want us to give our hard-earned money.

I want to help but I'm not sure I can. The truth is, I'm not sure if I can trust that MY money, given to organizations near and far, will be spent as I deem appropriate. How do I know that the people who get MY money actually deserve it? What happens if some rich person comes in and gets a free meal or financial help when his home is destroyed? And what if it is a drug addict standing in that line? I don't even know the people in Maui so I would rather hold on to my money until something happens with people, I know who live around here because we should support local needs.

I used to hear the story of the Prodigal Son and I fully backed the older son. The younger son took his share of Dad's money and now is back. And where do you think the money is coming from for this party? Well, it might just be coming out of the older son's inheritance. And what about that is fair? Why should the older son work so hard only to bail out someone who can't make good decisions on their own? Maybe if the father would stop coddling the younger brother things would change. (Ever think that?)

I think Jesus would challenge us on that thought. It was Jesus that said in Matthew 6:3, “when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing.” Or Luke 6:30 Jesus says, “Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again.” Or from Luke 12: “Sell your possessions and give to the poor... For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” Let's be honest; sometimes I am not a fan of Jesus as he seems to know exactly where my heart is- and it's nowhere near Jesus.

Back in circa 2017, controversy abounded over a statement made by Pope Francis. When asked about how we should respond to people begging, he said that giving to someone in need "is always right". When asked what if the person spends it on alcohol, the Pope replied "if a glass of wine is the only happiness that he has in his life, that's ok. Instead, ask yourself what you do on the sly? What happiness do you seek in secret?"

I'll be honest; I have looked at money in very unhealthy ways. Money is MINE and even when I give it away, it's still mine. I donate money to a charity and not only brag to others about the wonderful thing I have done but expect a plaque or even to be mentioned in their next publication. I purchase a present for a loved one but if they decide to get rid of it, I want a say in what happens to it because I spent a lot of money on that.

So at what point is it [gift/money] no longer mine? It's an easy answer but not an answer I like. I could say that it is always mine but that is greedy. Truth is, I don't know if it ever is mine. We proclaim in church that all we have is a gift from God. And we thank God for it. But then something inside changes and I claim it as mine. The moment I claim it as mine, I start making plans for it and strangely the money turns my heart cold and becomes a god. And the longer I hold on to it, the longer I fight for control of MY money, the more powerful the god becomes.

That comment made by Pope Francis has stuck with me for all this time. A few months after I heard about the story, I found myself at a conference in San Antonio. One evening I went out for supper with a friend of mine. We had a nice dinner along the riverwalk and on our way back to the hotel, we encountered a man begging for money. I stopped and my friend immediately whispered "You aren't going to give him any money, are you? You know he is going to use it on drugs." She was probably right. But I thought about what Pope Francis said and realized that this money I was about to give him was a gift. And if it was a gift, it is no longer mine to control. The strange thing is I don't really know what the guy did with the money but that's not mine to worry about. It was a gift. And I walked away that night feeling good that I let that money go. I felt relief inside me. It almost felt like the money was controlling me and I was freed from that. Could I have spent it on me, for some church thing sold amongst the vendors? Sure. But what part of loving my neighbor says to hold back on giving to those in need because I don't know what they will do with it?

Giving money to others is hard. It is difficult to give money and to then let it go, knowing it is not yours to control. But Brothers and Sisters in Christ, it is so freeing to just give and walk away and leave the control on the bill because that money is what controls us; takes over us. I once heard a speaker say, "we print 'in God we trust' on the very god we trust." (Rob Bell) and he was right. There are people out there that need our help, but do we trust them to give them what we trust most? And when are we willing to change our hearts to trust the One God who calls us to feed, cloth, shelter, care for our neighbor? It's a hard question. It is a hard challenge.

Pastor Sara