

From Earning to Receiving: Value vs. Values

Scriptures: Isaiah 55:1-9; Luke 13:1-9;

Good morning, TUMC.

My name is J.D. Penner, and I go by the pronouns he/him.

I am coming to you from the cloud today, because I've been travelling this past week in the Southeast U.S. I am impressed, as a banker, how seriously they take Christian financial planning down here. All over the place in seemingly random spots we've seen signs that Jesus saves. Good for him! We bankers love savers. They're the best and cheapest form of deposits for loans.

Michele thought it might be good to ask a banker to speak about From Earning to Receiving, the theme for today. However, I am pretty sure that you weren't expecting a sermon on banking, especially in light of the Scriptures for today.

Earlier this week, Heather, Gabriel and I were at a hotel, and came down to the breakfast area for the included breakfast. On the counter, there was a jar with some cash in it, with a sign on it that read "Tips are like hugs without all the touching. Thank you". Cute right? But then I began to wonder if I had ever thought of a tip as a hug. I couldn't think of a single time when I would have rather hugged a server than tip them, or that they would have preferred a hug over a tip. It certainly would have been cheaper for me, but not so much welcome in an industry where wages and working conditions are notoriously poor. Moreover, are we really valuing money so much that it's only what we can get out of a

relationship that motivates us? Do we think we need to earn everything we have? What about those without the ability to earn?

This shift in what we value has occurred over time, and perhaps so subtly it's hard to notice. With all the power and information literally in our hands, I think we have become so self-reliant and concerned about our own freedoms, that we have forgotten some basic values, and what God intended for humanity.

This question of values and how society in most Western cultures has shifted in its view of values is explored in Mark Carney's book, *Value (s) - Building a Better World for All*. You may recognize Mark Carney as the former Governor of the Bank of Canada, and subsequently Governor of the Bank of England. Prior to his governor roles, he held various private and public roles in finance, including with Goldman Sachs and serving as the deputy minister of Finance under Ralph Goodale, a Liberal and Jim Flaherty, a Conservative. Many credit Carney's Bank of Canada leadership with helping Canada avoid the worst in the fallout from the 2007-2008 economic crisis.

In his book, Carney observes how we have moved from a market economy to a market society. He argues that there are disconnects between the valuations in markets and the values of society. There is a distinction between values and value, although they are related. Values represent the principles or standards of behaviour of what is important. Carney cites examples of values, such as integrity, fairness, kindness, excellence, sustainability, passion and reason. Value, however, is the regard that something is held to deserve; that is, the importance, worth or usefulness of something. Both value and values, are judgments. And therein lies the rub, Carney says.

Increasingly, the value of something, of some act, or of someone, is equated with their monetary value., and that monetary value is determined by the market. The logic of buying and selling no longer applies only to material goods, but increasingly governs the whole of life, from the allocation of funding to healthcare, to education, public safety and environmental protection. It is no longer values that drive decisions, but the monetary value of something that informs those decisions. We have begun to treat all aspects of life as commodities, but we assume, that even as we do that, the values of society will remain unchanged.

We now know this last point, that the values of society will remain unchanged the more we use market valuations to guide decisions, to be entirely untrue. Society's values have indeed changed, and we have lost the sense of a community that values the common good. In fact, what we have seen, is that, in this age of individualism and freedom, people have been drawn to communities or groups of people who care less about the common good, and more about their own freedoms to do as they please, and that they have somehow earned a right to do so. Whether driven by misinformation, or by their own desire for connectedness with others, our communities have splintered without closely examining the values that we have adopted in the process. And, by trying to solidify our own individual positions by what we value, we continue to further erode the common good; we entrench inequality of opportunity, education, race, class gender, and differing generations, when we only value what serves our own individual needs now. I agree with Mark Carney when he suggests that climate change is the ultimate betrayal of intergenerational equity. He states, "It imposes costs on future generations that the current generation has no direct incentives to fix". To

point on how valuations and values are out of synch, look at Amazon, the company, with its \$1.5 trillion in equity, indicating that the market believes it will be profitable for a very long time. In contrast, it is only once the Amazon region is cleared of rainforest for cattle herds and soya plantations that the Amazon region begins to have value.

We have moved from a market economy to a market society. We value what is earned or what something can earn us. And thus, we are doomed to destruction, because, as in the words of Isaiah that were recited earlier, our thoughts are not God's thoughts, and our ways are not God's ways.

In fact, we can see what happens in our faith when we only value what we earn. We think we need to somehow earn God's love and respect, and the respect of others. Let's call this the "Iffy God", that is "If I do this, then God will redeem me". How often have we occasionally prayed "God, if you do x, y, z, I promise I will be faithful, I promise to do the right thing". Are we trying to bargain with God? Does God really want our faith to be based on some kind of transaction? Do we not have the values that drive our behaviour, or do we only act because we can earn a reward? This kind of transactional single direction faith between me and God is not what will keep God's creation together, and it's a human frailty to suggest that such transactional faith is a genuine faith. The whole concept of earning one's value with God is illusory at best, and a deceitful delusion at its worst, that justifies all manner of sin. And it's not based on a love we *earn* from God. NO, God loved us before we showed up - we don't need to earn God's love. We were already loved, and we need live into the image of God in which God created us.

What God calls us to do is to live according to the values demonstrated best in Jesus, whose journey of faithfulness led him to the cross. And that faithfulness is more than just a love of God the creator. Look how Jesus took care of others. Have we lost the values that connect our community? Have we as a community, or society, lost the values, the faithful bonds that bind us together, especially during the pandemic. Perhaps it's time we relearned God's ways.

So, how do we recover what we have lost, where we have turned from God's ways? For that, let's look to Scripture, and in particular, the passage in Luke that was read earlier. There are two parts to this particular passage; Part 1 – sin isn't what kills you – i.e., God isn't a vengeful sort; but there is an urgent imperative to change our ways, and Part 2 – presents a different understanding of how God wants us to live.

Part 1 discusses an incident which only appears in Luke, and not mentioned in other historical records – some questioners ask Jesus about the death of Galileans at the hands of Pilate, while they were worshipping God and offering sacrifices. Jesus here counters the narrative that was popular at the time, and lingers to this day, that the reason for suffering for an individual was due to sin, or the sin of their parents. As he does elsewhere, he challenges this notion, asking the group, “Do you believe all of them were sinners?” Or, he goes on, that those that died in a building collapse, the Tower of Siloam, were somehow extraordinarily sinful, thus deserving of an extraordinary death. Sin in and of itself does not bring one's demise. God does not kill you just because you sinned. However, Jesus says, unless you repent, you will perish in any event. Notably, Jesus uses the word perish here. “Perish” in NT Scripture is often seen as the opposite of Eternal Life,

as in John 3:16 – “for whosoever believes in him, will not perish, but have everlasting life”. So, bottom line, life is short, if you want everlasting life, get your act together, and quickly. End part 1.

However, Jesus doesn't stop there. Part 2: Jesus continues with a parable of the barren fig tree, to provide pointers to how God's ways are not our ways. Here, Jesus describes a tree that isn't bearing fruit, where the owner, says he planted the tree three years ago, and he still doesn't have any fruit – he has no return on his investment! What value is this tree to me if it bears no fruit? The gardener replies, give me one more year, let me nurture it and provide it some fertilizer and loosen the soil, and if it still doesn't grow, then we can look at chopping it down. Look, the gardener is saying, for this tree to be successful, it needs to be nurtured in the right way. Give the barren tree some love and see what happens then. It's evident that in this story, we are the tree. We can either allow someone whose only interest is market value to make a judgement on whether we have earned our place, or we can allow ourselves to be nurtured by the Divine gardener so that we go from being barren to producing fruit. We must reconsider this notion that everyone needs to earn their spot in the orchard, their value according to the market, and we need to move to receiving what we need to be fruitful. And it's not something we can do on our own. We need the nurture and care of other hands to get there. We need to go from earning to receiving.

Here's an image of receiving from the Divine: before there was anything there was God, and what God created was good. The very first words in Scripture are of God giving, before we even existed. Whether you take the Creation story literally or figuratively, humanity was blessed with a creation that we did not earn, we

received it as a gift from God – passive recipients. Our failings to honour that gift by making bad choices caused Adam, Eve, and our earliest ancestors a bunch of trouble, just as we are facing now. We have forgotten what it is to nurture and to be nurtured in God's ways.

Now, I could end here, and we'd be left with the message that we just need to receive God's grace, understanding that it's freely given, feel that we are nurtured, and we're home free. But it's not that simple. While we are individuals, we are born helpless, in need of care from others in our immediate community, just as Jesus was born as a helpless infant needing care from a community. If we didn't need the care of a Christian community, to be reminded of God's grace, to be shown what it means to love, and then share that love, then all we would need to do is show up on a Sunday morning, listen to some Scripture, sing or listen to a few feel-good songs, pray for ourselves, perhaps a token prayer for other people to see things our way, and leave. That's not why we come together, is it? If so, that really misses the other part of God's beautiful creation. God created us to thrive as creatures in community with each other. The nurture that takes place in communities of faith, and communities in our neighbourhood where we all strive together for the common God, er... I mean, common good. The loving Christian community is the primary place of nurture. It's why we have Sunday school, a youth program. It's why we sit together in worship, pray, study and sing together. It's why we give to causes collectively that help more than if we gave only individually. It's why we give our time to the church, its agencies and ministries. God not only wants this from us, it's what a Christian community attempting to be faithful to Jesus' example nurtures within and among us, so that the love we receive from God grows exponentially. We don't earn our spot in church, just as

we didn't earn our place in this community or in this world – we received it as a gift. There are countless times that people in this community at TUMC have said that TUMC has helped them more than they thought possible. I'm on one of them, and it's one of the reasons I still hold this church, and the denomination to which it belongs, so dear after 53 years. The love of the community is what sustains us. What we should value is what Jesus taught us to value – love of God and neighbour. And allow ourselves to be nurtured like children every step of the way in that love was we grow as individuals and a community. It's why we sing hymns like Heart with Loving Heart United with enthusiasm. It is along these lines that we share a vision with larger Mennonite Church, both USA and Canada, a vision statement that we collectively adopted in 1995, that we also have in our TUMC Constitution, and discusses the values that we still share today.

God calls us to be followers of Jesus Christ, and by the power of the Holy Spirit, to grow as communities of grace, joy, and peace so that God's healing and hope flow through us to the world.

Now, go, share what we have received. And be nurtured in your faith in the One whose example we follow.

Amen.