

Jackpot!

November 20, 2022 at First Church in Cambridge, Congregational, UCC

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Texts: Act 2: 42-47

Two weeks ago, just after All Saints Sunday and Pauline Fennel's memorial service, I welcomed a diverse group of five mostly out-of-town longtime clergy friends for a three-day retreat at the parsonage. It has become an annual ritual for us to gather, going on 20 years now. We all graduated from Harvard Divinity School and were ordained around the same time. One of them led a school in Kenya for years and we'd catch him on his annual trip to the states. He now lives in West Virginia. Another led the Rothko Chapel in Houston and has served other non-profits since. Several of us have been leading local congregations of different denominations. After 20 years of meeting, and not interacting much at all between our retreats, we've developed this powerful once-a-year rhythm of deep-dive, soulful check-ins about our lives, families, vocations, personal and professional joys and struggles. When we gather by day, we ground, share silence, each take an extended turn to share our lives, and offer profoundly attentive listening with ample time for support, questions, and even, when needed, some loving and truth-telling challenge. At night, we break bread, drink, party, and play games. We share tears and times of uproarious belly laughter throughout. All but one who is local stays with us during the visit which only adds to the embodied camaraderie and feeling that we are family.

Well... as you may recall, two Tuesdays ago, there was a big ol' Powerball jackpot on the line. When our group first gathered, someone suggested we each fork over 10 bucks and buy a few tickets. None of us usually play or even like the lottery but we said 'sure, why not!?' I asked how much the split would be. One said, "about 200 million each!" Talk about belly laughter! But truth to tell, when I heard that number, my very first thought was: "oh man, if we hit it, I'd peel off the first 10-20 million easy and give it to First Church. That could take care of our endowment and structural operating deficits and allow this institution to thrive all the more freely and do its essential work in the community and world!" Well...the person who proposed the idea went out and grabbed a few tickets and we didn't think about it again until late Tuesday morning when we were on a break from our discussions. I watched him stand in our kitchen, stubs in hand, as he checked then doublechecked the website and said 'wait, hold on, I think we have 5 out of 6 numbers. We definitely won something.' And we did. Shouting and giddy totally childish elation began to rise throughout the house though it was still mostly disbelief as he was confirming. We had indeed hit it! 5 of 6 numbers meant we had won \$50,000! The odds were 1 in 913,000! Literally an hour later, check-ins and schmeck-ins, we were at the last place I would have imagined us to be that day, the State Lottery Commission Headquarters in Dorchester! Though we were all people of faith, this was a "you need to see it"...you need the check-in-hand... "to believe it" moment so we beelined it over, filled out the required tax forms for pool-winners, and decided which one of us they'd write out the after-tax check to. It was me! Our joy and laughter were off the hook by this point! To top it off, we met the nicest employee who guided us through the process. She was tickled that we all were clergy and clearly wondered about the power of our prayers and connections despite our telling her that really wasn't our theology! Still, when we were finished processing our winnings we laid hands on her and prayed for husband who was having surgery later that week. Well, by 2 pm, the check was deposited, we had a plan for the distribution, and we were back to our usual routines with a little more spring in our step heading into election night. At some point, it also dawned on us, with exceptionally grateful hearts, that we had just shared in the largest jackpot in history for it was the same

day that some guy in California picked all six numbers and won over 2 billion dollars! Amazing right? I've got pictures and a big foam check right here to prove it!

What an experience and what a learning - amidst our joy, there was also some degree of horror at just how gladly we took money from a system that none of us believed in, and how rapidly we ran to the commission and bank. Money does strange things, when we have it, when we lose it, when we come into it unexpectedly, and also when we share it! You knew it was coming back to Stewardship Sunday, right?

Gratefully, our passage from Acts offers some trustworthy guidance. The day the Spirit came, “they committed themselves to a life together, the common meal, and the prayers …believers lived in harmony, holding everything in common. …They sold what they owned and pooled their resources so that each person’s need was met. They followed a daily discipline of worship, meals at home, every meal a celebration, exuberant and joyful, as they praised God…”

What a beautiful template for intentional community, for life together! And how far our modern capitalist system and household economies have come from such an all-in sharing and distribution of resources such that each person’s needs are met. And yet here, as a church, we are invited to be like those early churches, modeled after the way of Jesus, where resources are pooled, and all things are held in common, we share our lives, pains, and joys with one another such that everyone can be nourished.

To be honest, when I learned that my after-tax, happily-split-6-ways share, was \$5900 my first thought was not First Church! It was helping to cover Nellie’s junior year college housing in Burlington, paying off some unexpected expenses, and maybe saving some for a big birthday trip coming up. But it wasn’t too long after that I knew I wanted to split a good-sized share of this totally unexpected gift with this community and make a sizable increase to my pledge today. It was interesting to hear my colleagues name what they would do as well. Most live paycheck to paycheck. We all needed and could use the money for different things. Yet being clergy means most of us have needed to walk the talk of a stewardship sermon or twenty such that considering giving away a portion, a 10% tithe say or if not far more, was readily part of the conversation. Reflecting back today, I think this comes as much as a matter of habit, that is, as a matter of a spiritual practice, one that we’ve cultivated over time for almost as long as we’ve known each other. Tithing and some of us do more than 10% of our income, has meant for most of us building up practice over time, increasing percentages from 5 to 8 to 10 or more right off the top of our incomes, such that now, I and we in this group and I know many of you *always* think about our money communally, collectively. Imagine that! Our culture so trains us to consider what’s “mine is mine” and what’s “yours is yours” - at least within our families - income, inheritance, retirement, lottery winnings or other windfalls. But here, and in our scripture from Acts, we are invited to think and indeed to act differently, counterculturally, to consider our resources and our lives communally and collectively and this is a beautiful and biblical thing! We are invited to be part of an intentional living community right here and it means sharing deeply of ourselves in every way.

My dad was fond an expression - “shared pain is half the pain, and shared joy is double the joy!” How much more true is that when it comes to our shared financial life. There was a great joy in winning the lottery, but the best part was sharing it with 5 people I love deeply, 5 others who I knew wouldn’t sulk for a second about having missed the really big jackpot or needing to split it 6 ways – 5 others who were exuberantly grateful to share a moment of dumb luck and delight which not only doubled by sextupled

our joy that day! What's more, we realized in the midst of it that we already had the jackpot and it was the gift of each other, of our deep relationships over time.

And First Church, the same is true for us! Talk about having a share in the greatest jackpot in history! Look around - this thriving, thrumming community of difference-making and meaning making in our lives and the lives of others - a jackpot through the generations of God's grace, beauty and love, a gift from our ancestors, to care for and pass on to our descendants. Look at the ways we can ease pain for one another and multiply joy - bread and wine, loaves and fishes a plenty, an extravagant feast of abundant life in community across time, an opportunity to practice generosity, to praise God, to give thanks, to align with our deepest values and purpose, amidst a world that is desperate for countercultural spaces of grace, memory, and hope like this one! Amazing, miraculous things when we pool and pledge our resources!

Friends, if you are in a position where you can increase or double your share this year, or ease someone else's burden, please, this is the year to do so. If you are struggling financially with rising inflation, let us share in that struggle with you! We are in it together, with an opportunity before us today to pool our resources, to build a deeper sense of intentional community. And the best part is - the jackpot of God's love and grace is already ours! May it nourish us and inspire us to live all the more joyfully and generously. Amen!