What if we substituted “fear of loss” for “love of money”?

Most of us, I think, would say that we are not obsessed with becoming richer and richer. But how many of us can say that say that we’re not frightened by the prospect of becoming dependent on others, or living on the street, or having to down-size to the point of not having a sufficiently comfortable life? Or somewhere along that spectrum?

Just guessing here—perhaps projecting my own inner anxieties onto others—that the fear of loss is a stronger strain among us ordinary folks living in this part of the world than wanting to get rich.

It’s not an easy thing to confess, this anxiety, because I believe that it’s a sign of spiritual weakness, at least as I experience it. We believe in some form or another that God will provide everything we need. Yet money matters can send me into that fear and lack of trust before I know it’s happening.

There’s something wonderful about the way the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible translates this verse from Paul’s letter to Timothy: “For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, and in their eagerness to be rich some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pains.”

A root of all kinds of evil. Most of us heard over the years, “Money is the root of all evil.” That was always a misquote, and it’s ubiquitous. “Money.” Pink Floyd. You might recognize it as the song that begins with the sound something being rung up on a cash register. Not all the lyrics are pertinent (not by a long shot), but these are: “Money. So they say is the root of all evil today.” Hmm. And that’s 1973 rock and roll.

It has always been “the love of money.”

But beyond that, this more accurate translation reminds us that there are other roots, and other evils.

Thirst for power, pride and egotism are a few more roots, for example.

And evils . . . well, you and I know that those are practically endless, though they tend to be variations on the themes of disregarding and exploiting others in pursuit of benefits for ourselves. Before moving away from this reading, we do well to note Paul’s take on the consequences of these behaviors: “wandering from faith” and being “pierced with pains.”

Maybe “obsession with money” would be a good 21st-century rephrasing of “love of money.”

It's no coincidence that our passage from First Timothy comes in late September, the time many parishes are asking people to make their pledges for the following year. And we all get it.

How we spend our money is important, and it says a lot about us. We want our money to help others, not merely provide a comfortable place to worship each Sunday. We all know that, and Epiphany does about as well as anyone could expect given our size and the financial resources at our disposal.

So this is not the prelude to asking you to give more or to “give till it hurts,” or “give till it feels good.” This is about our relationship to money.

What our Lord gives us in the parable of the rich man and the beggar is an opportunity to reflect on our relationship with all that God has given us.

How do I spend my money, my time, my prayers, my emotional energy? If you’re waiting for me to tell you, “This is exactly how should do that, in detail, in each of those areas,” you have along wait ahead of you.

Instead, I have an invitation for all of us. To look at how we spend our time and energy and, yes, money. The energy/money connection is a good one, I think. The more we devote to worry about and anxiety over anything—especially in light of today’s readings, money and finances—the less time we are apt to devote to gratitude to God for the incredible, unpredictable, wonder-filled lives we’ve been granted.

As soon as I wrote that line I thought how much it sounds like the fear of scarcity I mentioned above. We have time for both worry and gratitude. God has given us an incredible capacity for thought, imagination, and inspiration. We just need to be good stewards of all of that.

As a parish (taking the heat off each of us an individual for the moment), we need to embrace that gratitude, that assurance of God’s abundance. We have come through some pretty challenging times already, and by God’s grace, and your generosity (which is a manifestation of God’s grace), we are here, together, singing—literally, singing—the praises of a God who sees us through all things. Not just to get through to the other side of a difficulty, but to be with us during those difficulties, revealing to us that the divine is all around us, in our hearts, in our community, in our connection with each other.

My son Ben gave me a little watercolor kit when I was pretty much confined to the house for a few days. It has had a virtually transformative power for me. I haven’t produced any great—even significant—art. Couldn’t tell whether the little sketch I did for my wife looked more like a yellow rose or a meringue.

But the process is one that helps me lose track of time a little bit at a time, and I feel that it helps me enter into God’s time, free from what I usually do with time, left to my own devices. It’s a humble little example, but I pray that you, too, have ways of doing the same—meditation or exercise or anything that helps you to be grateful for this amazing life we’ve been given.

If our little church, and our worship together, can help to offer to those who come through our doors that bit of calm, a few moments of entering into God’s time, a sense of gratitude for all the gifts we have received, I believe we are doing God’s work, following God’s will for us in the world, carrying the message that love is stronger than fear.

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