



Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens

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“Enough Is Enough”

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Centering Thoughts

There are three gates to self-destructive hell: lust, anger, and greed. Bhagavad Gita 16:21

It is not the man who has little, but he who desires more, that is poor. Seneca

Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions. Luke 12:15

...that's what this country is all about. Tryin' to get more stuff. Stuff you don't want, stuff you don't need, stuff that's poorly made, stuff that's overpriced. Even stuff you can't afford! Gotta keep on getting' more stuff. George Carlin, BRAIN DROPPINGS

Sermon

How perfect the band chose to play “For the Love of Money,” with its reference to the ‘Almighty Dollar’. The dollar holds power over many. It is an idol many serve if their quest for wealth is its own end, or when life becomes overwhelmed by their desire for wealth or efforts to accumulate it. And by wealth, I refer to more than money. It includes anything we desire to have in abundance, such as artwork, jewels, clothing, collections, even children, FaceBook Friends, personal status or prestige, power, and more. Sometimes these things have no intrinsic value, but we still want them. I believe our ‘possession obsession’ may mask a misplaced attempt to fill a spiritual hole in our lives. Like the king in search of a magic ‘happy’ shirt, we often look for spiritual cures in material things.

In our drive for things, we consume valuable resources required to produce or obtain them. With Earth Day nearing, we should remember that our resources are finite and our consumerism has consequences. To save our souls as well as our planet we must ask, “When is enough, enough?” Can we be like the farmer whose satisfaction lies within? Can we be less greedy for material things?

If you flinched at that ‘G’ word, I’m not surprised. Greed is fraught with moral overtones. We’re taught from an early age not to be greedy, to share our toys and take turns. As adults we’re

taught to share our gifts and talents. Here at UUFA, we ask for a share of your time, talent and treasure. But I don't believe we're greedy. Your volunteering serves you as well as the Fellowship. Your money contributions don't just fill our coffers. We put it to use transforming the world, as Michelle testified. We use it in service to the greater good and to live out our values. Greed, on the other hand, is the selfish and excessive desire to have things far beyond what's necessary.

Ancient Jews knew greed was bad because wanting things implied God wasn't providing enough. Early Christians called greed a 'deadly' sin, because greed turns a person away from the true God to Mammon, a false god, and sinfulness reduces your chances for eternal life. If you want things for no other purpose than its accumulation, like Disney's miserly cartoon character Uncle Scrooge McDuck sitting on his pile of gold, then you sin against God. This all-consuming love of wealth robs our souls from the rewards of higher pursuits. It provides no happiness because it values things more than relationships with people, animals, the common good, Earth, or the God of your understanding. People can be rich in things, but poor in spirit, unhappily searching for those magic shirts.

In Jewish and Christian theology, sin means turning away from God, of showing your back as you walk away from all God desires of you and all that God stands for. For me, I sin when I turn away from all I value as a Unitarian Universalist, such as our seven principles, printed on the back of your program. In the context of greed, it means turning to the material world for fulfillment rather than from my own internalized UU values. In our story, the farmer revealed he had no needs because his satisfaction and happiness came from within. The farmer knew life's blessings do not come from material things. He didn't need the king's castle or kingdom. The secret to happiness was a kingdom he already owned, a power he already held. Each of us holds this power, too. No one else can decide for us if we have enough, if we're happy.

Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Islam, Christianity, the great ancient philosophical schools, they all teach that we value the spiritual over the material. For example, in the Gospel According to Luke, Jesus said, "Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions." Even the Beatles recognized this when they sang, "Money can't buy you love."

Money can't buy you a ticket to heaven, either. Elsewhere in Luke, the author shares an encounter between Jesus and a certain ruler who has just asked Jesus what he must do to inherit eternal life. Jesus responds:

²⁰"You know the commandments: 'You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; Honor your father and mother.'"

²¹[The ruler] replied, "I have kept all these since my youth." ²²When Jesus heard this, he said ~~to him~~, "There is still one thing lacking. Sell all that you own and distribute the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me." ²³But when he heard this, [the man] became sad; for he was very rich. ²⁴Jesus looked at him and said, "How hard it is for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God! ²⁵Indeed, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God."

Jesus is not teaching that only the poor go to heaven. Nor must we interpret heaven as a place we'll find only when we die. Heaven can be satisfaction or happiness in this life. If you felt, right now, that you had all you needed, you had enough, wouldn't that be heaven on earth for you?

In this passage, Jesus knew the rich ruler was seeking fulfillment through accumulating wealth and power. Buddha would say the man was too attached to his wealth. Jesus and Buddha knew money can buy comfort, power, and prestige, but not fulfillment. How many celebrities and sports icons crash and burn after earning millions? Even lottery winners rarely find happiness after winning jackpots.

For Jews and Christians, following the commandments, including loving God, was the way to live a meaningful, satisfying life. For me, pleasing God translates to doing that which holds deep spiritual value, rather than material value. The kingdom of God for me lies within my head and heart and only exists when I act in line with my values. And for me, my happiness, my sense of having enough, comes from meeting three needs: Loving relationships; Life meaning or purpose; and Freedom from want. My happiness also depends on others having these same things.

I am like the farmer, satisfied that I have enough. I'm not settling for less, or convincing myself I need nothing more. Religion is not my opiate that prevents me from seeking to change what is. My conviction is that when these three minimal requirements are met for everyone everywhere, then we'll all be happy.

In another passage in Luke, a lawyer asked Jesus the same question about gaining eternal life. Jesus asked the lawyer:

²⁶ ... 'What is written in the law? What do you read there?' ²⁷ [The lawyer] answered, 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself.'²⁸ And [Jesus] said to him, 'You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live.'

Different answers for different people, but the same point: love God and love others. This one word, love, meets all three of my identified criteria for having enough. Love is given and received in relationships; love given and received in service gives meaning to our lives; and love for all unlocks the chains which will free us from want.

I said earlier, many of us are prompted to want material things to fill spiritual holes in their lives. If there is little meaning or purpose in your life, you try filling that void by adding to your shoe collection, buying a new car, or indulging in an entire bag of cookies. A magic solution, or shirt, won't fill the hole, no matter how hard you try. Prestige or power may feel good, like narcotics to the addict, but the solution is short-lived and only masks the emptiness.

Maybe you have meaning and purpose in your life, but no love. Regretfully, many haven't found a significant, loving relationship. But that doesn't mean love is absent from your life. Giving love to others through compassion and service can begin to fill that hole. Deep, meaningful friendships can also help. True love's absence may ache, but no amount of stuff will alleviate it. Loving friends at least affirm your worthiness to be loved. And we must always be hopeful.

Freedom from want may be our toughest challenge. When is enough, enough for you or me? I struggle between wanting to have enough for me and wanting to give enough to others. I know I have more than some people and I don't feel guilty about what I have, but I'm also not happy that others don't have what they need. I try to lend a hand and help others out, but the need is so great my money would be gone in a heartbeat if I just gave it all away. I worry whether I'm selfish by holding on to what I have for a future I can't predict. Because of my uncertainty about what is enough for me, I believe we collectively need to work at the systemic problems that keep people in need of the basics. And beyond the basic need for food, shelter, clothing, and transportation, I want people to be free of fear. Fear of violence to mind, body, and even Earth's future sustainability.

I know I have enough and don't need more just for the sake of having more. But I don't know if I have *more* than enough. I don't pretend this is easy for any of us.

Maybe we can get a better handle on what our true needs are if we held a 'What can you live without' challenge, something Oprah Winfrey suggests. Her rules: no eating out, no working late, no cell phones, computers, television or video games for a week or more. Some of us may already live this way because we don't have these things. If that describes you, look for something else you might give up. Coffee in the morning, maybe. Or give up some free time to visit the homebound. You could plan car trips more carefully to reduce excess travel, or arrange a car pool you wouldn't otherwise. The purpose is not to feel deprived, but to learn what is truly enough.

Alternatively, you might add something to your life. You might shift your goals to find satisfaction and fulfillment through a new way of volunteering, or holding more meaningful conversations with friends to deepen relationships. Become more like the farmer, Jesus and Buddha. Fill up your soul tank. Add meaning to life.

Maybe we could hold a 'Toy Exchange' before Christmas. What isn't exchanged can be donated. Kids can exchange toys or games they don't play with anymore. Adults can give their excess stuff to someone who has less. And the more we give, the more meaningful our lives will feel, shrinking our spiritual holes. As one hymn says, "From you I receive, to you I give. Together we share and from this we live."

Our lives are blessed, even in the midst of hardships, for we have one another and together we seek meaning for our lives and work to free others from want. May we share our blessings so that all have enough. May it be so.

Questions for Reflection or Discussion

1. How do you differentiate between what you want and what you need?
2. Is it difficult for you to give away money or possessions? Describe your feelings.
3. Why do you shop? What (besides absolute need) prompts you to possess more?
4. Does 'stuff-love' pose any danger to yourself, society, or the environment? Why or why not?