

Rev. Claire Feingold Thoryn

Theme: "Bodies"

Sermon: "**The Only Thing You Get To Keep**"

January 10, 2016

Call to Worship:

The Unitarian minister A. Powell Davies said famously that "Life is the chance to grow a soul."
It is good to be with so many people who are working to grow our souls, together.

Reading: "Nothing's a Gift" by Wislawa Szymborska

(Poems New and Collected 1957-1997, trans. S. Baranczak and C. Cavanagh)

Nothing's a gift, it's all on loan.
I'm drowning in debts up to my ears.
I'll have to pay for myself
with my self,
give up my life for my life.

Here's how it's arranged:
The heart can be repossessed,
the liver, too,
and each single finger and toe.

Too late to tear up the terms,
my debts will be repaid,
and I'll be fleeced,
or, more precisely, flayed.

I move about the planet
in a crush of other debtors.
some are saddled with the burden
of paying off their wings.
Others must, willy-nilly,
account for every leaf.

Every tissue in us lies
on the debit side.
Not a tentacle or tendril
is for keeps.

The inventory, infinitely detailed,
implies we'll be left

not just empty-handed
but handless too.

I can't remember
where, when, and why
I let someone open
this account in my name.

We call the protest against this
the soul.
And it's the only item
not included on the list.

Sermon: The Only Thing You Get To Keep

You guys, I did my best to let you off the hook for the pledge drive this year.
I bought five Powerball tickets. I really thought I was going to win.
I mean, I had a feeling about it. 900 million dollars! Follen would have been set for LIFE.

I had a bunch of plans for how I was going to spend that money. I am definitely called to
ministry, but I've always felt that my true calling is philanthropist.

This is actually true, I remember hearing the word "philanthropist" as a kid and asking an adult
what it meant. They told me that a philanthropist was someone whose job it was to give away
money.

I said "That's what I want to be when I grow up!"
And the adult told me, "Well, you have to be really rich."

So my dreams were dashed, because my family wasn't rich and I doubted I ever would be.
I couldn't be a philanthropist.
It was just as bad as when I learned I couldn't be an astronaut because you have to have perfect
vision.

Hence: my well-thought out plan to win the Powerball.
Step one: buy tickets.
Step two: have the winning numbers.

Well I carried out step one flawlessly but I am sorry to tell you, it was at step two where the plan
broke down. I did not win the Powerball. And I was going to ask if any of you did—
but I read the newspaper and no one did!

So, hope springs eternal; I'll try again for 1.3 billion, and if you try too and you win, well, maybe
it will be a good time for you to consider the spiritual practice of the tithe.

In lieu of winning the lottery, it is time for me to give once again, the Sermon on the Amount!

The Amount, as it turns out, is more than half of the way to being raised. Our Stewardship team spends all of December and early January in the “silent phase” of Stewardship, asking lay leaders who serve on the Program Council and Board and others to pledge early—so we’ve already raised about \$315,000. Pretty good for a pledge drive that just went public last night! Thank you Stewardship team!

The fact is that everything in this world costs money...even the things that are priceless. This community is priceless. Without you, this church would just be a building. Without our souls, our bodies would just be flesh. “Life is the chance to grow a soul.”¹ Nothing’s a gift, it’s all on loan.

And so each year we *will* this community into existence, by acknowledging, and even celebrating, that the priceless has a price, and it is up to us to pay for it. The loan is always coming due. The poet Wislawa Szymborska in her poem reminds us that our bodies are priceless too, yet not so priceless that they can’t be repossessed. *That* loan becomes due for all of us. I love how she says that at the end, we will all be not only empty-handed, but *handless*.

You can’t take it with you...no riches follow us to the grave, even the biggest Powerball win. The only thing we get to keep is our soul.

Nothing’s a gift, it’s all on loan.
I’m drowning in debts up to my ears.
I’ll have to pay for myself
with my self,
give up my life for my life.

To me it seemed very fitting to have the worship theme “Bodies” come at the same time as stewardship, because it hits two things that people in New England feel a little squicky talking about: bodies and money. Mix them together and I feel like folks are ready to squirm on out of the pew. So let me give you an actual chance to squirm and move your bodies.

Our spiritual exercise to go along with the worship theme this month is a Body prayer. It is a wordless prayer that you can do sitting or standing.² Let’s all do it together. Please rise in body or in spirit. I’ll talk you through it the first time, then we will do it two more times without words.

Hands together, bow - reverence
Hands up in raised bowl – receiving the spirit, open
Hands crossed over chest - take spirit we have received to our heart and embrace it.
Hands up – release, surrender, vulnerability
Close with hands together, blessing, bow, reverence.

It feels good to pray with our body, doesn’t it?

¹ A. Powell Davies, as quoted in this morning’s call to worship.

² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yNzwJZoeTI8>

The Puritan roots and intellectualism of our Unitarian Universalist faith tradition means that a lot of UUs would rather not admit that we have bodies at all. The stereotype is we'd rather talk academically about religious experiences than have religious experiences. The comfort zone for our spiritual practices is heady, abstract, and verbal.

And the class background of our faith tradition—especially in this area, emerging from the Bostonian, New England elite—means we would rather not admit that money exists at all either. The stereotypical comfort zone for UUs to talk about money is *not talking about money*.

Which is one reason I am so proud of Follen and how good this community is about being open and honest about how ministry costs money. And more ministry costs more money. And that money has to come from somewhere. Nothing's a gift; it's all on loan.

I know sometimes it might feel like you come to church to get some comfort, and end up getting chased out of your comfort zone instead.

Lutheran minister Nadia Bolz Weber was recently asked what her spiritual practices are for getting closer to God. And she answered:

“Why would I want to get close to God? Whenever Jesus gets close to me I end up having to love someone I hate, give away more of my money, or forgive someone I don't want to forgive.” She went on to say that in her life it feels more like “God has come after me.”

During pledge season at church it might feel like your steward is coming after you. Well, I believe that God—or whatever name you like to use for all that is holy and beautiful and loving—is present in each and every human. I believe divinity runs in our blood, that these vulnerable bodies are precious vessels for the holy: our heart, the liver, too, each single finger and toe, every tentacle and tendril.

And so, maybe that steward *is* God, embodied, coming after you, chasing you out of your comfort zone, asking you to take part in the spiritual practice of giving away money.

Sometimes God just won't leave us alone. “Life is the chance to grow a soul.”

Now I'm no saint. I like *stuff*. I like the things that money can buy. And I STILL don't have matching bedside tables. Someday.

But the longer I'm in this world, the more I try to just be a better person. And darn it, part of my belief in what it means to be a good person is to be a generous person.

That's the value I try to live in my vocation, my friendships, my life.

So every year Ben and I talk about our pledge, and every year we consider our income and our expenses: mortgage, the high cost of preschool, loans, retirement and college savings, our tax bills, and then we come to a number. Some years we are able to make a big jump-up in our

pledge because of income or expense changes, but some years we are only able to make a small increase.

We have stopped ever leaving our pledge flat: we always raise our pledge at least by the cost of living percentage, because if we didn't it would have the effect of unintentionally decreasing the value of our pledge. And then I try to increase it, even just a little bit, beyond cost of living, because that's when I know I can feel it—that's when I'm truly exercising that muscle that is generosity. Our pledge last year was \$3,120, up from \$3,000 the year before that, up from \$2500 the year before that. Our pledge this year is \$3,200.
That adds up over time!

And do you know what I just realized that means? I am a PHILANTHROPIST, y'all.

And SO ARE YOU. Do you pledge to Follen? Do you give your money away to people you love and causes you believe in? If you love human beings, and you give your money away, you are a philanthropist. That grown-up who dashed my dream was wrong. You don't have to be rich. You just have to be generous with what you have. Childhood dream achievement, unlocked.

Spiritual practices are things we can do with our bodies.
Spiritual practices are things we can do with our money.
Sometimes we have to get uncomfortable to get right.
Sometimes we have to embrace the push of the spirit...treasure it in our heart....
and release it back to the universe: surrender, pay back the loan to become who we need to be.

Every tissue in us lies
on the debit side.
Not a tentacle or tendril
is for keeps.
we'll be left
not just empty-handed
but handless too.

The only thing we get to keep is our soul.
This life is our chance to grow that soul.

Please rise and do the prayer once more with me:

Hands together, bow - reverence

Hands up in raised bowl – receiving the spirit, open

Hands crossed over chest - take spirit we have received to our heart and embrace it.

Hands up – release, surrender, vulnerability

Close with hands together, blessing, bow, reverence.

Amen.