

Giving Your Treasure Back to God
Matthew 6:1-6
First United Methodist Church, Baraboo
October 21, 2018
Pastor Marianne Cotter

When parishioners showed up at La Salle Street church in downtown Chicago, in September 2014 they expected a typical Sunday service. Instead they left church surprised, perplexed, excited and a little nervous. Each had been given a check for \$500 and were told: “do good in the world.” That summer the church had received word of the sale of property purchased years before. The church had joined with other churches to create a low-cost housing project and that property had been sold. The four churches each received \$1.4 million. This news came when the La Salle Street Church was struggling. They were losing access to a downtown parking facility. They were having to cut operating expenses; staff cuts were looming. But someone asked: why not give some of this money away? Why not give away a tithe 10% (a tithe)? They decided to take \$160,000 and give it to their members. So, that Sunday in September 2014, instead of being **asked** for money, church members were given a “LoveLetGo” check for \$500 and told to “do good in the world.”

One person there that day was Eric Larson, who worked in a rehab hospital. In October 2014, a month after the LoveLetGo giveaway, Eric Larson read a post on Facebook from a missionary friend in Africa. His friend, Linnea, was pleading for a woman named Fatou. “Abandoned by her husband and family because a leg injury had rendered her incapable of typical women’s work, Fatou had traveled throughout her country, trying various indigenous healing methods to no avail. At the end of her 13-year exodus, she ended up in the town where Eric’s missionary friend, Linnea, served. With Linnea’s help, Fatou received medical treatment. But the doctors determined that amputation presented the sole option to save Fatou’s life. Linnea asked for donations of any amount toward the cost of the surgery. That’s when Eric reached out, asking how much in total was needed for the operation. The response: \$500. The figure got Eric’s attention. So Eric sent the money and Fatou received her amputation. In November Fatou recovered from surgery. She spent much of her time with her new friends in Linnea’s community, sharing her story of grace. After 13 years of exile, Fatou lived fully and happily.

This story reminds us of the rewards that come when we give away our treasure with the right attitude. You **can** give away your treasure out of a desire for recognition. You **can** give away your treasure to show how good you are. Good religious folks are tempted to do just that. In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus describes the life of discipleship – it is a life of righteousness (right relationship with God and other people). Jesus knew righteous people would be tempted to be proud of the good words they do – the almsgiving, the praying. He knew that when we do

these good things out of a desire to be recognized, that will be the only reward we get (to be seen by others).

There is a better way to give though. I think Eric Larson learned that better way. To explain this better way, I need to tell you the rest of the story about what happened next in the story about Fatou. In the last two weeks of December, Fatou's health took a devastating turn for the worse. In early January she fell into a coma and died. When Eric heard the news he said "I felt like I had failed because the funds didn't buy a cure." As someone who worked in a rehab hospital, Eric knew how long the recovery from an amputation would take, he envisioned what the rehab process would be like. And he had estimated when Fatou would be healthy enough for a prosthetic leg. He had imagined a future for her, including worthy work and perhaps a new family." But in that moment of feeling like a failure, Eric was infected with the attitude we are all prone to have: the attitude of giving in order to get something back. Even when living generously "we are tempted to keep score." said Rev. Laura Truax of LaSalle Church and her colleague Amalya Campbell who told the story of the "LoveLetGo" giveaway in Christian Century magazine. In Eric's case the keeping score was the desire for success in how he used his "LoveLetGo" money. He felt like had lost face, because the other church members would be coming back with incredible stories of the impact of the \$500 gifts. " In the end, Eric began to see the tremendous victory his gift of \$500 won. Fatou might have died alone and desperate; instead she died in a community of people whom she loved and who loved her back. She was able to participate in the life of God as she experienced "koininia" – sharing love in the community of faith.

In the better way of giving there's no "success" or failure. Our tendency to keep score falls apart. Instead there is only an invitation offer to us all: to participate in the good things God is doing in this world. We get the chance to be part of something greater than ourselves.

This kind of giving isn't possible apart from a life of prayer. That's why in this passage from the Sermon on the mount, right after talking about almsgiving Jesus talks about prayer. Just like giving to the poor must be done in secret so should prayer be done in secret. The capacity to freely give away some of your treasure is rooted in a relationship with God who has been extravagantly generous with us.

In this better way of giving, we don't give for what we'll get back. We don't give because others will notice. We don't give in order to succeed in the eyes of others. We give because of the love God has first given to us. In giving us God's very self in Jesus Christ we've been given a "LoveLetGo" gift beyond compare. When Moravian missionaries came to the West Indies from Europe, to bring the good news of Jesus Christ, they brought their coffins with them. They expected to live out their whole lives in the West Indies. They prepared to give everything -- their whole lives – in service to the God who gave everything away to us. In this they embrace life but did not cling to it. They knew the value of their treasure and they also knew the preciousness of giving it away.

Here's what I hope you will take away from the gospel reading today and from this story about the "LoveLetGo" give away at La Salle Church. God isn't against stuff. God knows we need stuff to live. God wants us to have treasure. We all have been given treasure. We have all been given treasure in various forms -- our lives, the people who care about us, this earth, the means to live, and you can keep on naming the other contents of your unique treasure box. We all have some treasure meant to be given away. There are rewards in our giving away but they are not the rewards of keeping score. They are the rewards of being part of what God is doing in the world. In the Christian faith, giving is "koininia" – sharing in the community of faith – sharing in the life of God.

We are privileged to know a God who gives it all away. God so loved the world that he gave his only son, that whoever believes in him will not perish but have eternal life. As you share part of your treasure with others, may you know the joy and peace that Fatou, Linnea and Eric Larson found sharing the treasure of their lives.

Thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

This story was taken from "Take and Give" by Laura Sumner Truax and Amalya Campbell *Christian Century* April 12, 2017.