“Our Purses; Our Purpose”

The Rev. Lisa J. Durkee

September 28, 2025

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, Oh Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

I got a bit carried away this week, thinking about the purple robed rich man’s thirst. I broke out my journals remembering the greatest thirst I had ever felt, thinking about what I would have given to alleviate it. I then spent time writing, so I hope you will be able to keep focused on the idea of generosity even while I tell you a story that may seem to drift. I do eventually come back to our lives of faith, I promise, but it may be that you also will consider our own purses and what is our purpose when, in future, you think of thirst and when you think of those from whom we learn most important lessons.

Around five miles from Kodaikanal in the south of India, there is a small village named Vellagavi. More than half of those five miles half are downhill on the way to the village, and at 7,000 feet above sea level, wind through some of the most beautiful scenery I have ever encountered. Having left my small house before dawn planning with friends only to see the sun rise from the plains, at a place called Dolphin’s Nose, I hadn’t planned this trip. With the invitation to continue down the Ghat as the mountains are called in that part of the world, I of course said yes.

Vellagavi is still only accessible by foot. As I descended early in the morning, several of its inhabitants passed me, nearly jogging up the steep incline with baskets of fruit balanced on their heads. I remembered their pace later, when I toiled slowly at the end of my journey. It was strange to see single power lines winding through the eucalyptus trees that struck out at the arid sky. Vellagavi only received electricity the year before I arrived in the early 1990s, and only use it to power their lights. When I arrived at the village with my friend from Australia, we were greeted by scores of children who took it upon themselves to show us first their favorite local shrine and second, their post office. They were very proud of it. I wondered who delivered the mail, imagining to myself someone like Brian, who used to chat with my girls each day. I knew the post didn’t arrive in Vellagavi by grey slacks with pinstriping down the sides.

After a fairly brief round about the entire small village, a man, seeing us with the children, raced inside his home and back again. He reached out his hands to offer us two limes each. They were perfectly round, and their skin looked hard and unyielding. His smile, though, was as inviting—as brilliant and warm as any I have seen before or since. He was pleased by our presence, certainly aware of our effort to arrive there, and he was pleased to offer us a gift.

I was touched by their gift as he gave it to me. I was quenched by its juices when, over an hour into the trip back *up* the five miles to home, I ran out of water. I had not planned for this whole day’s journey, and my lips had begun to crack with the heat. Remembering the limes, and I reached into my pocket and cut open the seemingly hard skin with my knife. Though the juice stung my lips as it passed, I was not as painfully thirsty anymore.

I share that, because I wonder whose thirst we are quenching? I have to tell you that I was a bit uncomfortable as I read through the scripture for today and found that if I were to stick with the lectionary, I would have to talk about money. You see, I live in this same world that we all do, and I know that we would rather talk about the way our faith offers us comfort than the way it challenges us to live. You may not know it, but there are 2,100 verses in the Bible focused on possessions. Our scripture—God’s revealed Word to us—does not skirt around the issue of our possessions and our faith, and neither should we. The Gospel, the *good news* of God’s love, speaks to us about everything we need to know to live responsively and responsibly in the reign of God.

Martin Luther, the great Reformer who urged us to regard scripture as our sole authority, recognized the difficulty of uniting our faith with the way that we value money and our material possessions. In describing the path to Christian living, he wrote, “There are three conversions necessary: the conversion of the heart, the mind and the purse. Of these three, it may well be that we moderns find the conversion of the purse the most difficult.” It amuses me that he wrote “we moderns” in the early fifteen hundreds. What might he note of our engagement with “things” now? Maybe, more significantly, we might ask ourselves what he would make of our Christian living. From what and to what do we consider ourselves converted? Sometimes, I think we have a sense that we do not need to change the way we live. We can call ourselves Christian without considering what it means to the way in which we live our lives. If we look to our scriptures, if we look to our Christ, Jesus, we can’t do this, though.

While there are 2,100 verses around the topic of possessions in the Bible, there is no repudiation of material goods as such. . . . The same epistles that condemn greed as idolatrous can command provision for oneself and one’s family as a duty. So says Hudnut-Beumler in a wonderful book called *Generous Saints*. So, if you are beginning to be uncomfortable with this morning’s message, maybe uncomfortable because you are wondering if I am going to advocate for living the life of monks and nuns, never seeking any of the comforts that money can provide, please adon’t worry. The Bible does not say that we are not to earn a good living; nor does it say that we are not meant to enjoy ourselves in this life.

Our enjoyment, though, can not be at the expense of another’s simple comfort. In each of today’s lessons, from the Gospel, from Amos, and from Paul’s letter, we are told as directly as we might imagine that we should not put our *faith* in material wealth. Our *faith* should be in God, who has given us every provision necessary. So, in what do we measure our abundance?

The man in Vellagavi, whose name I never knew, was not a saint, at least not by our definition of those who believe in our Lord Jesus as Christ. Yet, I would praise him for his generous giving. And he gave out of nothing. I know that the people of this village do not have any extra. In fact, to give me two limes may have meant depriving someone in his home. When strangers arrive, however, he gives. I can only imagine what he might do in seeing someone truly in need. What can we imagine ourselves into doing for those who are truly in need? Can we give, out of our material abundance, so that those who are need no longer want? What do *we* need? Is it more than the knowledge that God loves us, has promised to provide for us, and that we gain everlasting life through the gift of God’s son?

What does our conversion to Christian living look like? If we are the hands of Christ in this world, today, what are we doing with these hands? If ours are the purses of Christ in this world, today, whom are we feeding? If the man in Vellagavi asked us what it means to be a Christian, how could we show him through how we live? If ours are the voices of Christ in this world today, for whom are we speaking?

The Reverend Doctor Yvonne Delk was the first Black woman to be ordained in the UCC, in 1974, and served for over 50 years as an educator, preacher, organizer and prophetic voice leading the fight for human and civil rights for people of color, for children, and the poor throughout five continents. Now 86 years old, she continues to speak up and for others at every moment she can. I wish that I remembered more about the talk she gave at Andover Newton when I heard her speak some years ago. I made a point of jotting down her quoting Burt Bacharach as she shared with us her lifelong search for something to believe in. She quoted lyrics we remember best from Dionne Warwick. “What's it all about Alfie? Is it just for the moment we live? What's it all about When you sort it out, Alfie? Are we meant to take more than we give Or are we meant to be kind? And if, if only fools are kind, Alfie, Then I guess it is wise to be cruel And if life belongs only to the strong, Alfie, What will you lend on an old golden rule?

What will we lend on the old golden rule that Jesus taught us? Love our neighbors as ourselves. I think of generosity most often in monetary terms, but I am learning from our Black brothers and sisters that the greatest gift our relative privilege gives us is a voice, and in my own, a more public voice than some are allowed. We are called as disciples of Jesus Christ to be peacekeepers and peace makers. Increasingly, I believe we are to put our voices and our wallets to action in a clamorous cry for justice and for peace, here and abroad. How we do that is multifaceted. How we do that may well be a challenge to the societal status quo, but what Jesus asks of us has never promised to be easy. There is the greatest joy in the abundant life that we are promised. There is also great joy and cost in our joining with those who suffer, who suffer hunger, violence, incarceration without justice. Jesus was willing to give his life for us, so that we might know this abundant and eternal life. So, thinking about the man in Vellagavi with limes in his hands, I wonder what we are willing to offer. I pray we might consider this question together and respond with our voices, our hands, and our feet. May our lives speak so clearly of our faith that no one will need ask in whose name we come. Amen