

While we all might have different amounts of money in the bank and be at different spots financially, living in a first world country all of us are given much. And sometimes it can be easy to get caught up in our possessions. But when we don't let our possessions own us and have a mindset of making God and others the basis of our life, what we find is that we are a much more happy person, and the amount of good things and happiness we create is worth far more than what money or possessions can do for us.

Some years ago in Reader's Digest, in the 1940s, Henry Robinson shared his story of how he came to learn this from an elderly lady who approached him selling apples.

"Any apples today?" a cheery voice asked at his studio window. "Winesap, Wealthy, Northern Spy? Can't you use a bushel?"

Henry stepped out into the haze of an October noon to take a look. At first glance, the woman seemed older than the world's aunt. Her face, wrinkled with twice his years (as he put it he was then an arrogant 26), was an herbish bouquet that made you think of tansy and thyme. But the most remarkable thing about her was the light that burned in her wonderful brown eyes.

He followed her to a small truck with the legend *Euphemia's Apples* painted on its side. She plied him with samples, and he ended by buying a bushel of red-cheeked Winesaps. On credit, of course. Cash was the one thing in the world he lacked just then. He had a wife, a baby, ambition—everything but money. "Pay me whenever you like," said Effie, climbing into her truck.

All pretense of payment was dropped during that desperate autumn while his funds, food, and fuel ebbed to alarming lows. Euphemia came often, always bearing some gift: a gallon of maple syrup or a jar of peaches.

She guessed that his work was not marching and could see that he was too young, too inexperienced, to make it march. Well, there was nothing she could do about that. But she could do something about his woodpile—and she did. One day before Christmas, she rode up in her truck. It was covered with pine boughs, and under the holiday camouflage was a half cord of seasoned rock oak sawed into just the right lengths for Henry's drum stove.

There were other generosityes, always unobtrusive. Their baby was not doing well, so Effie financed his wife's trip to New York for consultation with a specialist. They were not the only recipients of her kindness. Effie's soul was a house of many mansions, jammed with people whom she had befriended. One day she read in the paper that a pregnant mother traveling from San Francisco had arrived penniless in New York, only to learn that her husband had been killed in an accident. Effie cashed a \$500 bond and sent her the entire amount. A lifelong correspondence with an intelligent and grateful human being was Effie's recompense.

Effie was not a rich woman. Her income, derived from investments she had made while running an interior decorating shop in New York, had never exceeded \$200 a month. The 1929 crash reduced this to a pittance, which she eked out by peddling her apples. But even when her funds were lowest, she always managed to help someone poorer. One of Effie's cardinal principles was never to "lend" money. She preferred to give it outright. Surprisingly often, the money came back. Many times Henry saw her come out of the post office waving a check. "Bread cast on the waters," she'd say triumphantly—adding, with a touch of rue at the wasting years—"ever so long ago."

In dealing with touchy customers like Henry, Effie tried to conceal her generosity under the guise of a business arrangement. For instance, her father, who had been a painter, had written his autobiography. In the trough of his worst financial crisis, Effie dug out the dusty manuscript and offered him a fee for editing it. Not until after her death did he learn that she had sold another bond to pay him for this job.

Effie's chief delight was conversation or, rather, a kind of Scheherazade storytelling. Henry would sit enthralled while she depicted the lives and loves of people she had known in Paris, Rome, or New York, furnishing her discourse with heroes, heroines, and villains.

Years passed before Henry was able to return the money that Effie had given him from time to time. She was ill in her final years and had aged rapidly in the last year. "Here, darling," Henry said one day, "is the negotiable part of what I owe you."

Tears were in her eyes as she handed back his check. "Don't give it to me all at once," she pleaded.

"Why not, Effie?"

Her face was very old, tired, and beautiful as she said, "Give it back as I gave it to you—a little at a time." Henry reflected she believed there was magic in the slow discharge of a love debt—some secret talisman that would shield her against death till the account was closed.

The simple fact is that Henry never repaid the whole amount to Effie, for she died a few weeks later. At that time it seemed that his debt would forever go unsettled. But a curious thing began to happen.

Whenever He saw a fellow human in financial straits, he was moved to help him—as Effie had helped Henry—by small outright gifts of money. He can't afford to do this always, but in the ten years since Effie's death, He has indirectly repaid his debt to her a dozen times.

The oddest part for Henry of the whole affair is this: People whom he helps often help others later on. Eventually, the few dollars that Euphemia gave him had been multiplied

a hundredfold. So the account can never be marked closed, for Effie's love will go on compounding interest in hearts that have never known her.

It gets at something that Cardinal Francis George who was the archbishop of Chicago said at the end of his life, and that was the only things you take with you in the life to come are the things you've given away on earth, meaning you'll only have in heaven the love you cultivated below. And in her life, Effie certainly cultivated much that continued to produce more and more love to others in ways that she could not have ever imagined.

In the Bible, we hear a lot about the importance of detachment and this theme fills our readings this week. Solomon or Qoheleth in the first reading speaks of all things as vanity, better translated as something that is passing and that comes and goes. He looks back on his life and sees what one can put so much energy into, in this case getting ahead financially, it only lasts a short time. And in the Gospel, we have the parable of the man who has so much he wants to keep on enjoying it so he builds a bigger barn.

These are really timeless stories, because we can all get preoccupied with getting ahead, or our stuff. What then is the Christian to do with respect to our possessions? I think what it comes down to is simply making sure that our possessions do not control us or own us, and that we have the proper perspective on them and realize that as Paul says in our Second Reading we are to seek what is above, which we do by being people who love God and neighbor with our whole heart and soul rather than ourselves and our possessions first.

As a starting point, we don't take these readings to imply that having things are bad. Most all of us have stuff; clothing; our homes and things in our house. Effie had a home and possessions too. We live in the world and can enjoy the things of the world. I enjoy my camera equipment, my television, my books, my laptop computer and don't feel bad for doing so. And were I to win the lottery, I'd probably get a cabin too. There's nothing wrong with having things.

Here's the thing though with things: we want to make sure they do not control us. When greed takes over, it can cause harm. What we do with our possessions reveals the kind of people we are. Zacchaeus for instance in Luke's Gospel comes down from the tree and shares what he has with the poor; in Acts of the Apostles the Holy Spirit inspires the Apostles to share what they have with one another. They and people like Effie understand that life is not something we possess, but is a gift we receive, and so want to share it with one another. When we forget that, we can get caught up in our possessions. The question from someone in the crowd is asked on Judge Judy and in real life courtrooms quite often about sharing inheritance. When we cling to things they can cause animosity between people. Or when we put so much focus on the stuff it can diminish our relationships because we care more about possessions than other people. So when looking at what we own, I think it's always important to have balance. Do we give to charity? Do we prioritize the needs and wants? Do we budget properly or need

the latest and greatest thing? Our appetites for things can be insatiable which is why it's been said we are one nation under debt and as my classmate Fr. Don was fond of saying so many live in "suburbs of nothing," meaning the house looked great on the outside but inside wasn't furnished well because a person was trying to keep up appearances. We can enjoy our possessions so long as they do not get out of control.

Another thing to ask when looking at our stuff is how does it impact our relationships? Things don't sound good between the man and his brother in the Gospel if one is going to Jesus to sort it out rather than to his brother. There is always the risk for money to harm relationships. Some people do have to work lots of hours and multiple jobs just to keep food on the table. But others get married to their jobs much like the father in "Cats in the Cradle" and become busy bodies because they buy more and more stuff. It's OK to do with a little less if that means still having our needs met but more time that's able to be spent with others, which leads to also remembering that sometimes it's not just the tangible things that we can hoard, but the intangible things, namely, time. The other night I had dinner and saw one of the saddest things I'd seen in a while. Over the course of a half hour, a man was alone with his two children who appeared to be middle schoolers. One had his headphone on the entire time and was glued to his iPad. The other also had an electronic device. I didn't hear much of any actual conversation between the father and his children. Hopefully that changed when I left, but the point is that we are meant to be in communion with one another. It seemed at first glance the electronics were getting in the way of an actual conversation and if that were going on all the time, it would be impacting the family dynamics. So we want to look at what we have, and ask ourselves are we spending too much time trying to get more stuff, or too much time with the stuff we have rather than spending time with one another?

A last thing is to remember that while the focus is on material things in the Gospel, other things impact our relationships too with God and one another. If we hoard our time, we find so much lost at the end of life that could have been used for a better relationship with someone. Others become obsessed with power, or controlling others never letting go as kids grow up or wanting to be in charge at work or get their way. Time is such a valuable commodity because for all of us it's limited. Effie not only gave money to people, she gave them time and conversations which enriched her life. I've yet to have a funeral where the family members told me about the things that they were given that cost money that mattered, but in each case it was the time loved ones gave them that created the memories that will last forever.

I don't know about you but I've daydreamed every once in a while when I put down a dollar and get a lottery ticket. I'm likely not going to be on Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous (were that show still even on the air) but I am blessed. I have things that give me enjoyment, but much more important than that is the fact that I have a God who loves me and great people and one wonderful golden retriever who fill my life. As Effie realized as did Cardinal George, what matters isn't the bigger barn, but cultivating the love here on earth which we do by making sure our possessions never own us, and sharing what we have with one another especially our time. That's something good to think about as we prepare now to receive Holy Communion where we are reminded

once more how God gives us everything including Himself, His Body, His Blood. May we respond to that by giving what we have to one another to build not a bigger barn, but a bigger community of saints in the Heavenly Kingdom.