

What we have

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Job 38:1-11
Matthew 6: 24-34
Luke 6: 24-26

Today I tackle a topic that I have assiduously avoided since becoming a pastor 10 years ago. You may not have noticed since we have been able to get a few other people to talk about it occasionally.

As I set goals for myself this year, I decided to step toward the topic. Consequently, it has been a theme in two continuing education events in which I have participated: a day in Lancaster last November and three days in Harrisonburg at the School for Leadership Training at Eastern Mennonite Seminary. This winter, the Seekers Sunday school class talked about it and even wanted to start a small group around the topic. I am still no expert, but I have stopped backing away from what I don't totally understand.

The topic? Money.

It is probably ridiculous to be this skittish about money. But in my position, here behind the pulpit, there are a few practical reasons for my discomfort. The most obvious is that my paycheck comes from you all. While I am ready to encourage, and sometimes use a bit of persuasion, to get people to share their spiritual gifts, I do not want there to be a perception that I twist arms, or offering envelopes, in terms of financial giving. It feels too self-serving.

But money is not just about my paycheck. To talk about money is to acknowledge the paychecks we all get — or don't. We live with some big inequities in our economic system. I receive a paycheck for work I love. Some people get paid for work they hate. Others love their work as stay-at-home parents or volunteers, but are not paid monetarily. And some of us would just like to have a job, any job, to pay the bills.

Money talk in our congregational context inevitably leads to the fact that as a congregation we are choosing to spend close to \$1 million on renovating our building and making it accessible. I am very excited about the project and am eager to imagine the new possibilities for ministry and community involvement that may come our way with the renovation. I am grateful for our commitment to justice and hospitality and for your generosity and consistency with your pledges. And ... we will have a big loan to pay off when the project is completed.

Not all pastors are as reticent to talk about money as I have been. My reluctance is partly an overreaction to the prevalence of the prosperity gospel. There are plenty of churches where the message each week is that God wants to make the faithful rich. The teaching is simple: We have been blinded by evil that is trying reduce our true creative ability and keep us poor. God's economy is abundance, and God uses multiplication to bring us riches. (<http://www.harvestwells.com/ge/7reasonswhy.html>) Faithfulness means giving your money to that preacher's organization and God rewards the faithful, financially.

I agree — in God's economy there is abundance. I am pretty sure I heard theologian Walter Brueggeman say that at the School for Leadership Training. But what

we hear Jesus saying in today's texts is not quite like what prosperity gospel preachers teach.

Maybe this is why the Seekers Sunday school class was so interested in talking about money. There is not uniformity among Christians about how to approach money. As Anabaptists, we pay special attention to the words of Jesus, and Jesus has plenty to say about money and wealth.

Matthew and Luke give us two different approaches to the issue. In Matthew's Sermon on the Mount, Jesus sounds a bit like Bob Marley: "Every little thing gonna be all right." Or Bobby McFerrin: "Don't worry, be happy."

Luke's Jesus, in the Sermon on the Plain, sounds more like an Occupy Wall Street rally, the 99 percent shouting down the 1 percent. "Hey, hey. Woe, woe. Watch out you rich, 'cause down you go."

Jesus seems to have conflicting messages for groups at either end of the economic continuum. The message in Matthew is for those who are barely making it, those who worry about how they are going to find firewood for cooking, food to eat, goods to barter for clothing. Jesus says, "Stop worrying. Do the birds plant? Do the flowers wonder what they will wear? God will take care of you too."

Luke's message is for the rich, who clearly aren't worried enough. "Watch out! What you have today will be gone tomorrow. Laugh now, but hard times are coming your way."

As someone who is not so fond of black and white, it is hard to know how to handle these very decisive words. Where is the grey area? What about those of us who

are not really poor, but definitely do not qualify as the 1 percent? How are we to take these aphorisms? Are Jesus' words just hyperbole to get us all thinking?

Or is there really no fuzzy, grey center? We have to choose our allegiances, like Jesus says. Either trust in God or trust in money. Where does that leave those of us in this country where it is written right on the money "In God we trust"?

Perhaps one of the reasons Jesus speaks so clearly about money is because of his own place in society. Jesus is not a rich man. He doesn't live long enough to become wealthy, and he has no family money to fall back on. Galilee is blue collar or no collar, not a prosperous region. According to Matthew's gospel, the first four followers of Jesus are all fisherman, (Matt 4:18). They occupy the low rung on the financial ladder at the time. Much of their catch goes to pay Roman taxes.

The fifth disciple Jesus calls is Matthew, a tax collector (Matthew 9: 9-13). He is eager to leave the dirty work of collecting taxes for the Roman Empire and follow after a man who talks a different line about money.

Jesus is accused by the religious leaders of hanging out with "sinners" (which was code for "poor") and with tax collectors. His companions are not only low on the economic ladder, their financial status leads the religious leaders and Roman establishment to assume that they are low on morality as well. If you are poor then you have no morals. (You see how this takes us right back to the prosperity gospel. If you live like God wants you to live, if you have faith, you won't be poor.)

In Matthew, Jesus talks about money but also our whole approach to life. When we serve God instead of money we live with less worry like the birds and the flowers. But here I have to talk back to Jesus just a bit because the birds in my backyard worry a

lot. They chirp and squawk and they worry. They have good reason. Last week the cat got a baby wren. Two weeks before that it cornered a baby robin.

The mama and daddy birds worry loudly and it works. I come running to chase the cat off the top of the birdhouse or to save the baby robin in the flower bed. Sometimes the parents take care of their worries themselves. The robins dive bomb the starlings to keep them away from the nest.

And the flowers? With the scorching heat this past week, and then the wild winds and crushing hail, plants may not worry but they do have troubles.

So what are we to do? Like the birds, some of us have babies that we worry about. Like the birds we band together. This morning we stood with the parents of young children to say, "You are not alone. We will be with you, we will help carry the worry."

Now some of us might worry about what to wear, but we don't worry about having nothing to wear. Most of us are more worried about overeating than having nothing to eat at all. And while we do laugh a lot, we are not unaware like those Jesus seems to be "woe-ing" at. Most of us are probably in between those who struggle daily and those who are unconcerned with any struggles at all. So does that mean Jesus' message isn't for us?

Or that we have to pay attention to both sides of the continuum?

I grew up in a family that was careful with money, that lived "more with less" and simply in every season; these passages where Jesus talks about wealth create worry for me. My mother was meticulous about money and lots of other things as well. Born during "the great depression," into a family that struggled financially, my mother learned

to keep track of every penny. After she died we found her small ledger books where she kept track of how much she spent, from the beginning of college (10 cents for envelopes, 20 cents for postage) until much later in life.

My mother also kept track of the books she read, the letters she wrote and the people she was praying for. Would Jesus critique this kind of record keeping? Is this a form of worry? Or is it a way to stop worrying and give it over to God? Was it a kind of devotional gratitude for what she had been given?

I suppose I could blame my mother that I have harbored the illusion that in order to preach about money I must first have it all together financially, understand spread sheets and budgets, and have a handle on the stock market. This crazy idea has not only kept me from preaching about money, it has most often prevented me from talking about money in other settings.

But it is not really my mother. It is my fear of Jesus “woe-ing” me, the dread of being that camel that won’t fit through the eye of a needle, that has held me back. All along, I have been worrying about money.

Lots of us worry and have questions about money, practical questions, moral questions, questions that we are living into and through. The Seekers class, with honest questions and varied experiences with money, inspires me to find ways to bring some of these questions into the open.

I have the unusual opportunity – for me – to preach again the next two weeks. I want to read the lectionary texts with an eye toward money, wealth and poverty. This is not a new idea, Latin American theologians have talked about Jesus’ “preferential option for the poor” for decades. Using the prescribed lectionary gives us the

opportunity to look not only at the texts that seem obviously about money, but where economics might be a bit less obvious. With money as a lens, how might we see the text and our own situations, with new eyes?

I still don't have money all figured out, in QuickBooks or in the Bible. And while Jesus does seem to have a real critique on money, I want to try and loosen my grip on the idea that everything surrounding money is black and white. What might it mean to venture into a more colorful world where money, and the fear of money, does not dominate but challenges, where worry is transformed into laughter? I hope you will join me on this journey.