

It's Only Money, After All
Luke 16:13, Mark 10:21-22, Phil 4:12-13
November 3, 2019
Rev. Dr. Marcia Bailey, preaching

There is *collusion* going on here that I suspect most all of us participate in. It's a cover-up, a silence-keeping that really needs to be exposed, unearthed, uncovered. It's been going on for years, decades probably, maybe even longer. It stunts our growth; it weakens our faith; it threatens our very existence. What on earth am I talking about?! I am talking about talking about **money**! I don't want to do it; you don't want to hear it. And so, we agree to say nothing to one another; to ignore it and hope it will go away. We conspire together to not discuss something that is central to our understanding of what it means to be a disciple, to be stewards of God's graciousness because it makes us feel uncomfortable.

Now maybe you've been waiting for this all along. After all, I've been talking about the "holy currencies" outlined by Eric Law and so surely you expected there would be talk about money! Perhaps that's the only thing you thought of when we used the word "currencies". What we've discovered is that we have been blessed by all kinds of currencies: the currency of relationship, the currency of truth, the currency of wellness. We see these currencies at work when we exchange meaningful conversation and share experiences with friends old and new. We benefit from them when those relationships in turn allow us to share our truth, to be honest with one another. We are blessed with the currency of wellness when we awake each morning to another day, when we can bless God with grateful hearts, when we are able to use our bodies and minds to explore and serve the world.

But those aren't the only currencies we have. We have the currency of gracious leadership; look around you. We have so many talented, willing leaders serving each other and our community in this place! We are gifted with the currency of time and place: this moment, the last and the next. This space and the neighborhood around us. And yes, we have also been blessed by the currency of money: faithful givers have committed financially to this endeavor for generations. We are here because of them and because of you, and those beyond our walls who have seen in the ministry God has called us to a reason to give dollars and cents to be a part of the Gospel in this place. So yes, *many* currencies. And yes, one of those is money.

So why is this the difficult one to talk about? I don't know but it's historic in most churches. Patterns established somewhere in the past have told us that talking about money is inappropriate in church; money is "of the world." We need to be "of God." We've been accustomed in our society not to divulge what we make, to be private about how much we own, to keep silent when asked to speak about the most fundamental, concrete expression of value our society acknowledges. In case you are wondering, there is no class in seminaries that teaches pastors to talk about or manage money. In most churches, pastors are intentionally left out of the financial aspects of the congregation, women clergy even more so. I have served churches where people were surprised that I "cared" about the finances; I have had to ask financial people, both in the church and out, to please address me and talk to me as an equal when I have been in financial conversations where all the rest were men.

We are funny about money! Our ideas about money are tied up in our experience of it: having it and feeling guilty about it or lacking it and feeling resentful. They are tied up in our faith: thinking that having more means we are "blessed"; having less means we are somehow

not doing it right when it comes to our relationship with God. Our culture pressures us to make more, to have more and to value each other less. Money is used to motivate us and to scare us. It is used to define us and to punish us. No wonder we can't talk about it. No wonder we worry about it. No wonder we struggle to place money in a Jesus-appropriate place in our lives; that is to say, no wonder we hold on when we should let go. No wonder we find it difficult to give when we really want to have it for our own.

The scriptures we read this morning all reflect the struggle we have with money. The verse from Luke comes at the end of a confounding parable whose challenges I decided to leave for another day. Even though the story is confusing the take away is not: "No slave can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth." Evidently making the choice of what to prioritize is not a new one! The man we have come to know as the "rich, young ruler" also struggles with this; the text from Mark captures the utter defeat and grief that overcomes the man who realizes that in order to gain the "riches" of God he must first divest himself of his earthly possessions. Even though he is apparently not up to the challenge, he is not less valued in the realm of God. "Jesus, looking at him, loved him," Mark recalls. How important it is that we see that same look of love cast on us when we struggle to sort this stuff out.

I grew up in a family that had enough. My father worked for the same company for nearly all of his adult life, and all but the last five years of it in the same location. My mother was a full-time homemaker and volunteer. I learned that we ate what we ate each week because it was what was on sale at one of the three grocery stores she shopped in; she made it her business to know the prices of every item she purchased in all three stores and knew where to buy what

accordingly. The pot roast or chicken she cooked for Sunday dinner was meant to last most of the week. The clothes my sisters outgrew were passed to me. The pictures on our walls were cut from magazines and framed. Vacations were joyous explorations of the world we lived in via camping and car travel, all carefully plotted out in a small notebook to make sure we had enough to get home.

Why do I tell you this? Because our stories about money and how we feel about it are strong determiners about how we act in relation to it as adults. We had enough. More than many. But because of my mother's "Welsh" ways (she could say it because it was true) I shop sales and scout bargains. I camp and drive. I recycle, reuse and repair. But my parents also gave generously, to the churches they belonged to, to the organizations that were meaningful to them, to those who were in need. And so, I strive to follow their model and to respond to the Gospel's call to do the same. At times when my own financial future seemed uncertain I have always and only prayed that I would have "enough." And I have always been blessed.

And that's what the final text this morning, from Philippians, reminds us; that with God, there is always "enough". "I know," writes the author, "what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty. In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being well-fed and of going hungry, of having plenty and of being in need. I can do all things through [The One] who strengthens me." What would it be like for FBC to talk about money, openly, personally, with one another? What would it be like for FBC to decide that we will *not* collude or conspire any more with the silence-keeping around money and that we will use money as a true currency of blessing to serve others?

What does *that* mean? It means taking the risk of using money to empower others when we might not get money in return. Instead we might make or deepen a relationship, we might learn a truth, we might discover gracious leadership. What if instead of just hoping people will increase their pledges this year, we just outright decide its ok to talk with one another about what we give and why; about how we decide what to give and what it means to us? What if we each made a commitment to live out of a sense of abundance rather than scarcity, a model of Jesus as opposed to our society? What if we decided to give money away and see what happens? Could we even consider trusting God with such a radical idea as this?!

We treat money as if it has magic powers, as if it's taboo to talk about openly, as if it's hold on us is unique, as if it's seductiveness is too alluring to resist. But maybe if we could be honest and truthful (another currency) about the role of money in our everyday lives, we could discover a solidarity with others who also seek this Jesus-path of generosity, of caring for others, of serving the needs of the marginalized *before* we take a big cut for ourselves. It's only money, after all! It's a piece of paper printed with fancy ink; it's a disc of metal, not all that different from a slug. Before money as we know it, folks traded apples for sugar and labor for lumber. The greater currency there was relationship, not money. It was who you knew and what they could offer, not how much was in your pocket.

Money is tricky; we have somehow convinced us that we cannot talk about the thing that most people think drives our economy and our world. Jesus suggests something else. Jesus suggests that what drives our economy is love; what builds our value is mercy. What ensures our future is grace.

Let's talk about money. Let's demystify it and reassign its value. Not to the future but to the present. Not to ourselves but to others. Not to scarcity but to the abundant wealth we have in God's Love, mercy and grace, in us and in the world.