

Money

Every year around this time, Washington DC seems like a city filled with Chicken Littles hollering that the sky is falling.

This excitement comes whenever the nation's debt limit must be raised or when Congress has to pass a bill to fund the government.

Games of "who will blink first" of course only adds to so much cynicism when we look at our government and political leaders.

I mention this because when we think of money, we often think it's the opposite of thinking about our spiritual lives.

But in fact, money, and how we deal with it, treat it, think about it, lies right at the heart of every person's, and every community's, spiritual journey.

If you were raised within the values of western capitalism, money takes center stage in life.

It gives us social standing.

It's the ticket to an easy life.

Which of course collides head on with what the gospels have to say about life, and money.

Which explains why we see so many outright heresies flooding the TV channels.

What with nonsense like The Prosperity Gospel (also known as "God wants me to be rich!") to big haired Evangelical pastors claiming

that Jesus is delaying the second coming until you followers send in more money!

And let's not forget the fellow who's sure God wants him to have a new private jet!

But if we're to take the gospel seriously, we really are called to look again (and again) at our relationship with money.

And perhaps a good place to start that "relooking" is the old adage that says:

"You don't **think** yourself into a new way of living.

You **live** yourself into a new way of thinking."

In other words, what we **do** with money is more important than how we **think** about it.

And isn't that what Jesus is getting at with the rich young man today?

Isn't that what motivates us to be here today?

We're trying to **live ourselves** into a new way **of thinking!**

And there's no place where the rubber meets the road better in making this transformation than coming eyeball to eyeball — with money.

Because the common thread in our culture is that what I have — is none of your business.

What I give — is up to me.

What I've earned — is mine to do with as I please.

The only problem is, Jesus flat out rejects this entire line of thinking.

Not that it's a new problem.

It's as old as the first caveman paying for a spear point with a clam.

And because dealing with money is a problem as old as humanity, it should be no surprise that Jesus talks about money more than just about any other single topic.

One out of every three parables has something to do with money.

Not to mention the widow and her mite.

Caesar and his taxes.

And Jesus clearing out the Temple's moneychangers.

Because money then and money now is what we look to for security.

For consolation.

For comfort and well-being.

Jesus points out that while we often don't realize it, we routinely give money a kind of spiritual power.

We give money a power that makes it nearly impossible to enter the kingdom of God.

Because God's kingdom can't be bought or earned.

It can only be received — as a free gift.

And so the hard question becomes, is it even possible to overcome the spiritual power of money?

A power that grows as we accumulate more of it?

And of course, the answer is "yes!"

It IS possible!

Here's how!

Just, give it away!

Refuse to treat money as something sacred.

Which allows money to become what it actually is:

A tool to help one another.

Rather than a false idol that I bow down to and worship.

Like any idol, money begins to look pretty foolish when you look at it closely.

In fact, when you see money for what it really is, it's practically hilarious!

“The paper it's printed on isn't worth a red cent.

Years ago you could take it to the bank and trade it in for silver or gold.

Try that today and all you'll get is a funny look from the teller.

If the government declared that all the leaves of all the trees are now money – with enough for everybody – money would be worthless.

It's only worth something because there's not enough of it.

It's only worth something because the government says so.

And because, at least so far, people trust the government when it says so.

Which is about the only thing people trust about the government.

The value of money, like stocks and bonds, goes up and down for reasons that baffle everyone.

You can be a millionaire today and be dead broke tomorrow – without lifting a finger!

Great fortunes are made – and lost – completely on paper.

Then there are those who use up their entire lives chasing after money – so they can enjoy lives that are now entirely used up.

Jesus says that it's easier for a camel to go through a needle's eye than for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of God.

Why do you think?

It's not that the rich are inherently bad.

Perhaps it's because they're so out of touch with what life is really about that they can't imagine that God's Kingdom is something worth getting into in the first place." F. Beuchner, Whistling in the Dark, paraphrased/modified.

What if the kingdom of God really is the giant party that Jesus keeps talking about?

With all kinds of folks?

From all kinds of places?

Where everything is shared?

Where everyone is on equal ground?

With no classes and no status?

Well, for some folks, that sounds just like hell, don't you think?!

And perhaps that's what gets us to the heart of the matter.

Whose money is it sitting in my bank account?

To **whom** am **I** accountable?

Aren't these the questions that are "sharper than any two-edged sword?"

Piercing until it divides soul from spirit?

Joints from marrow?

Judging the thoughts and intentions of the heart," as the letter to the Hebrews asks this morning?

Several years ago I went with our bishop and some other clergy to Denver for a seminar.

It was a seminar to learn how to ask people to remember the church in their will or trust when they die.

I must say the whole thing made me feel quite uncomfortable.

Talking to folks about money and death do not make you the most likable guy at the cocktail party!

But truth be told, it's a conversation that's important to have.

It's a conversation that forces us to sit with, to ponder, wrestle with, and then answer, these questions:

To whom do I belong?

And who is the source of my treasure?

It's the conversation Jesus begins to have with that young man.

Telling him to sell everything and come along for the ride of his life.

The whole of our faith is about helping us develop the eyes to see and the ears to hear that, at the end of the day, nothing belongs to me.

We are, by the grace of God, temporary custodians who are entrusted with whatever we may have.

This God who freely pours out air and water, sunshine and snowflakes.

That's the focus of this part of our liturgical year.

Focusing on the pledge.

And generosity.

And yes, money.

This is the time, as we near the end of the year, to live ourselves into a new way of thinking.

To put on the liberty and joy that the gospel so freely gives to us.

A liberty and joy that has tugged at our hearts and minds all year long.

As we travel with the disciples who leave everything to follow Jesus.

This Jesus, who gives freely to the unworthy.

To the confused.

To the lost and the least.

Even to me.

Even to you.

+amen