

Money

It's not my fault — blame Jesus for this one, but this morning, we've gotta talk about dough, moolah, bucks....you know, money!

Because that's what Jesus is talking about today, in no uncertain terms.

And the place I want to start is with a local United Way officer who realizes that she's never received a donation from the town's most successful lawyer.

So she calls him, hoping to persuade him to contribute:

"You know sir, you make at least \$500,000 a year, but you don't give a dime to charity; wouldn't you like to give back to the community?"

The lawyer replies:

"First, did you know that my mother is dying, and has medical bills several times her annual income?"

Embarrassed, the United Way rep mumbles, "Um...no."

The lawyer continues: "Or that my brother, a disabled veteran, is blind and in a wheelchair?"

She starts to stammer an apology.

The lawyer interrupts saying: "Or that my sister's husband died in a traffic accident, leaving her penniless with three children?!"

Humiliated, she mutters, "I had no idea..."

"...So, if I don't give them any money, why should I give money to you?"

I stand here as one who for a long time was a regular and faithful member of the Episcopal church, and a real tightwad!

I too practiced law for years and made an excellent living; but it wasn't until someone sat me down and talked about money from a Christian perspective, that it even dawned on me to consider opening my wallet to serve Christ in his church.

And when I finally did open my wallet, after getting over the scary part and the lump in my throat part, why, it wasn't half bad!

You see, for the longest time, I put my faith in my bank account, while only giving lip service to faith in God.

And isn't that what Jesus is trying to get us to think about today?

And as we think about where our faith might be best placed, maybe we need to ask the central question of our lives, who are we really?

If you're like me, you may define yourself by your job or family or financial standing or political views or ethnic heritage.

We often think of ourselves as capable, strong, and maybe even significant.

All of which can be fine, but truth be told, that's our ego talking.

The Prayer Book defines us a little differently, as in: "earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust."

Because, no matter how smart, good looking or rich you may be, we are all in fact walking piles of future dirt....walking solely because the grace of God gives us breath — the breath that separates us — for a few years — from all the other piles of dirt that occupy the same cemeteries we will one day occupy.

We start with this fundamental reality because when it comes to money, especially in our society, money would like us to forget all about our true identity, our true destiny.

Money, like a modern Golden Calf, whispers that we can have it all, that the good times will roll on forever, which is why face lifts and botox and hair dyes are all the rage.

The Dalai Lama was asked what in life is most surprising to him.

He says:

"People surprise me the most. Because they sacrifice their health in order to make money. Then they sacrifice money to regain their health. They are so anxious about the future that they don't enjoy the present; they live as if they are never going to die, and then die having never really lived." (paraphrased).

It's not that money is all bad, it's that money has grown too big for its britches, and if we are to have a right relationship with it, we need to bring money down to size.

As St Augustine observes, "we are to love people and use things, and sin occurs when we confuse the two."

Which is especially true when it comes to money, since how often do we see folks love money, and use people to get more of it?

This is just another way of saying what Jesus says today, that what we treasure defines us.

Which, when we ask ourselves that question honestly and fearlessly, can be painful.....because we live in a culture that loves money, worships money, and is even a slave to money.

We talk about the economy as if it were a living breathing organism and we endow the stock market with powerful animal symbols like bulls and bears.

With money, we can seemingly ensure our own health and security and enjoyment.

Who doesn't love money????

And the more I have the better off I'll be!

Money is a power unto itself and because we so rarely drag its secret power out into the sunlight, many folks give to it a power that it neither earns nor deserves, as Mark Twain observed....

"Some men worship rank, some worship heroes, some worship power, some worship God, & over these ideals they dispute & cannot unite--but they all worship money."

And yet sacred Scripture is pretty blunt when it comes to the danger money poses to us all....

"But woe to you that are rich: for you have your consolation," says Jesus. Luke 6:24

Or the story of the rich man and Lazarus or the rich young ruler.....when our Lord makes it plain that "it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God."

Or the time Our Lord "looked up and saw the rich putting their gifts into the treasury; and he saw a poor widow put in two copper coins, saying, "Truly I tell you, this widow has put in more than all of them; they give out of their abundance, but she gives all that she has." Luke 21:1-4:

In the end, our love affair with money is really our love affair with ourselves; which of course is the exact opposite of God's call to us.

Fr. Richard Rohr says it so well:

"The greatest act of faith is to believe that God loves you, even in your nakedness, poverty and sinfulness.

But human beings always think we have to earn God's love.

By doing good for God, God will do good for me....

This is Jesus-and-me religion, a tit for tat religion.

It is a self-centered morality of self-protection....

It is pure heresy because it's message is, I can save my own soul!"

But 'Jesus' means: 'Yahweh saves.'

If you're all wrapped up in saving your own soul, how on earth can God save it?" (paraphrased).

It's the problem of the closed hand; how can I receive any gift from God unless my hand is open to receive it?

Perhaps we can think of faith as "a burning acid that tests every element of my life and society; sparing nothing, making me question my certitudes, my moralities, beliefs and policies, forbidding me to attach ultimate significance to any human activity.

Faith, you see, untangles me from money and family, and job and even my own best thinking.

Faith teaches me that the only thing I know.... is that I don't know anything at all." J. Ellul, paraphrased.

So how do we overcome the power of money, how do we make it useful but not in control of our lives?

Give it away, that's how!

Because, money, dear friends, like manure, isn't worth a thing unless it's spread around.....encouraging things to grow.....

"Jesus said to his disciples, "Don't be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom. Sell your possessions, and give alms. Make purses for yourselves that don't wear out, ..., where no thief comes near and no moth destroys. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."

+amen