

Scripture:

Matthew 22:15-22

A Wonderful Life in the Whale

Quote from It's a Wonderful Life: God: "There's a man down on earth that needs our help."

Clarence, the Angel: "Is he sick?"

God: "No, worse, he's discouraged."

Our relationship with money has a history as long as our lives but also as expansive as the family systems and culture of which we are a part. Creating spiritual practices for how we deal with money invites us to look back, to see with new eyes how and when our values and fears were initiated. Like George Bailey in *It's a Wonderful Life*, we sometimes need some help in the midst of the discouragement that comes with our fear about money. When we look back with a practice of compassion for ourselves and others and a faith that reminds us of our true worth.

In this scripture, the Pharisees are trying to get Jesus to either make the Jews mad because he answers in a way that indicates collusion with Rome, or put himself in the position of jeopardy with the Romans for teaching that taxes should not be paid. His answer puts money in perspective, but it is a complex perspective. The people live within the oppressor's systems of money and the Romans have the power to take it. But throughout Jesus' ministry, he indicates that ALL things are within the realm of God. Even the decisions made about what to do with money have spiritual implications. We, too, exist in a time when we live inside of a system of money that is not always just or fair or equitable. And yet, how we live within that system is a matter of spirituality and faith formation because it affects our sense of call to do as much good in the world as we can. To deny this difficult, complex relationship with money and live in fear of facing it can rob us of our agency and ability to use it for good. Beginning to understand our fear requires a looking back at the roots of this fear with compassion for ourselves because our relationship involves not only the family systems we grew up in, but also historical millennia of ambivalence about how to assign "worth."

"How is it that we might hear the impact of this story in our own contexts? What are the all-encompassing claims of ownership and right that Jesus would relativize for his people today? At the core, the issues raised by this biblical passage are ones of allegiance. If God owns all, then we belong to God alone. Yet we live a life in which competing powers and influences vie to own

us, to sway us, to capture our hearts. 'You cannot serve both money and God' means we need to guard against consumerism and materialism as competing allegiances to our loyalty to God.

This text addresses the call to live in whole hearted allegiance to God, while navigating life contexts that often pull at that allegiance. Such navigation is not easy, and we would do well to seek God's wisdom and discernment as we desire to follow Jesus in a world full of siren songs. Jesus is the source of God's wisdom—his wisdom shows through in his answer to this test by the Pharisees and Herodians.”

This series incorporates an excellent Book called "Integrating Money and Meaning (Practices for a Heart-Centred Life) along with the image of “The Whale” of our money system. The book begins with a quote from an East African Legend of King Sulemani and the Whale. “This fish was bigger even than any whale we know - as big as a mountain! And it had an equally enormous appetite: it ate and ate until it had eaten all the food left in the kingdom. And then it roared at the king for more!” The author Maggie Kulyk has worked for many years in the financial industry and this is the image that often presents itself to her. “Like King Sulemani’s whale our money system at least in the Western world is truly colossal, encompassing every economic, social, industrial, and cultural structure that makes up our complex society.

And like Jonah and Pinocchio, we exist inside this daunting money system, often unaware of how it surrounds us and affects not just our daily tasks but also our inner spirit and the spirit of our communities.

Kulyk writes “I see the effect of living inside this whale every day when I interact with my clients around money. People are worried, stressed, confused, angry, occasionally joyful, but more often fearful when it comes to money. The plethora of seminars, self-help books, and websites promising relief from this kind of anxiety attest to its prevalence in our culture.

Unfortunately, this mammoth system is not going anywhere. In fact, each day it grows larger. The web of institutions and policies we’ve created to interact with money grows in complexity, lack of transparency, and the ability to create haves and have-nots. This web, in turn props up just about every other aspect of society, including politics, the environment, research, education, religion, food, health, entertainment, art - the list is endless. Nowhere is this rampant expansion more apparent than in the outcome of the 2016 US presidential election, when a billionaire

businessman/reality TV show host with no experience in politics squeezed his way into becoming the leader of the “free” world. Money doesn’t just talk - it shouts.”¹

In the next few weeks we hope to cultivate some compassion for our anxiety about money both personally and as a congregation while we offer encouragement to look at our money issues from a spiritual perspective. The truth is we as a congregation do have stewardship and financial needs, but to just tell you that does nothing more for any of us than raise anxiety. Believe me I know that personally. Maybe, It is time for me to admit that most of my life I have lived in anxiety around money and so when this series came my way I pondered it. I wanted to put it away when all the pastors who were engaging in the series said it was good and hard and they learned a lot about their personal relationship with money. They said this series helped them explore how we can begin to heal anxiety about money so that the giving feels right and purposeful. Now some of you might want to walk out the door right now when I even say the word money from the pulpit because of the emotions or anxieties or the anger it raises. But I want to encourage you to bear with me and lets work through this together for a few weeks and see if we can find some healing and maybe even find a way to change our perspectives around all the ways we use/get/give and assign meaning to money.

We might not like to admit it, but every aspect of our lives is touched and influenced by our society’s mammoth financial system. This is even true of our religion and spirituality. No matter how much money people have in the bank or their retirement fund, or whether they grew up in a mansion, a one-room cabin, or somewhere in between, most have a complex and emotional relationship with money —often accompanied by deep wounds. What we have, and what we believe about what we have, greatly influence the decisions we make about how we live our lives and who we think we are—in other words, how we live inside the whale. If we want to live a spiritually abundant life, we must be willing to look back at how money influenced and shaped us – being careful to do this with compassion and without judgment. Once we are honest about this history and our relationship with money, we can connect this relationship to the larger tapestry of our spiritual journey.

If you came to our movie on Friday night you will have gotten a head start on this conversation and thought process, if you haven’t I encourage you to watch the movie “It’s a Wonderful Life” you can find it on youtube or Apple Movies or in a variety of places. As you watch it I invite you to watch noticing the characters relationship with money. Ponder which character you are most like. We may feel an affinity to more than one character type and the point is not to

¹ Kulyk, Maggie, McGeachy, Liz “integrating Money and Meaning (practices of a heart-centred life)

“pigeon-hole” ourselves into one, but to allow the characters to give us a gut-check about ourselves and others from our past and present relationships.

As I began to write this sermon I started to consider my history, with money. I grew up in a very middle class situation but my mother grew up relatively wealthy, so we are gift givers and at times we give away more than we can. I have always hated money to be completely honest. I always feel like I need just a little more. I have always worked jobs where I have found myself saying I wish I didn't need the money to do this work. I would volunteer my time and enjoy it a whole lot more. The choices and language our family of origin has with money is significant and for most of us to this day it affects how we see and experience money.

I really resonate with what Maggie Kulyk says about the relationship between our fear of the future and our fear of not having enough. This is a very human thing—even evolutionary—to want security. But at times it has skewed my perspective and decreased my enjoyment of life. Because I do love to be generous. I believe that giving creates incredible blessings and feelings of well-being—whether that is giving of money or time or attention or love, grace and forgiveness and I want that in my life. But I also have to acknowledge that the least generous I am is with myself which gives me a window into the work I need to do about my own sense of self-worth. I have been faced with that in a big way recently and I am being forced to reconcile with this.

Kulyk wrote “This is the spiritual practice I’m talking about: We want to be honest and engaged with our money but also spontaneous and trusting; involved but fluid; living in the present moment but not in denial about the future. Balance is possible in relationship to this thing we call money, but it’s not easy to attain. In fact, working on these issues is like holding a knife by the blade. Money will bring out some of the best and the worst in us, but this is of course what makes it such a rich and important spiritual practice.” (73)

Kulyk writes of a time she was at a crossroads. “In many ways my life was in utter shambles, but I had done at least one thing right. I had added a well-known spiritual practice to my daily routine, meditation. Though I was new to the practice and my mind raced frantically through every short sitting, for some reason, I stuck with it.

One day as I sat on my cushion, I seemed to be wrestling more than usual with my unruly thoughts, most of which were worries about money. Then out of the blue, the waters of my mind calmed and a message emerged: “Get up and deal with your money.” At first I resisted, trying to force the river of my meditation in another direction. This couldn't be “right” money and

spiritual practice don't mix. But soon I stopped resisting, and the message became clear: "Get up and deal with your money."

It seems really a strange concept for most of us to add money to our spiritual lives and practice but if we are willing to recognize the power and influence of "the whale" of money it can help us alter the power and influence it has over us to some extent, so we can live within it in a more balanced and healthy way, both physically and emotionally. It is possible to find meaning there; we are not powerless.

This honesty and deep practice can be at times painful, but ultimately it offers the opportunity to be more at peace in our lives. The second benefit of adding this conversation to our spiritual lives is that dismissing or denying the money systems feeds the power but spiritual transformation feeds a higher good beyond the systems focus on individualism. Through practice, we can learn to relate to the world in a broader, more meaningful and deeply healing way, even though we will continue to live within the leviathan. It's my belief that ultimately, individual spiritual transformation influences - in both small and large ways - the greater world. In other words, if our own hearts change, the heart of the whale changes too."²

The good news is that while we do live in the complex world of money that is not easy to navigate and can, in fact, feel quite discouraging at times, we can shift away from the underlying dread and fear of it by bringing it into the light of Wisdom, taking the stigma and shame out of it by seeing "worth" and "worthiness" in light of God's unlimited love and grace, allowing us to face whatever happens with hope and the assurance we are not alone. Simply addressing it together as a community is one proof already that we are in good company.

² IBID