

## *Money and Wealth*

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*The Rev. Amanda Gerken-Nelson*

Does anyone else want to preach this morning? Take one for the team?

Religion, politics, and money - the taboo topics in polite company

And, the three topics that Jesus talked about most

Today we get the latter: Money (wealth, riches, treasures)

In Luke's gospel, we hear quite a few stories of people or characters in Jesus' parables who struggle with money and there's definitely an impression that money is a big stumbling block to discipleship for Jesus

Think of the Prodigal Son in Luke 15 - a young man asks for his inheritance early thinking it's going to make all the difference in his life, and really it just messes it all up and what matters is most his father's eternal love

Or the rich ruler who asked Jesus what he needed to do to inherit eternal life in Luke 18 and after acknowledging the laws and his adherence to their guidelines, Jesus says "There is still one thing lacking. Sell all that you own and distribute the money to the poor" which made the rich ruler very distraught. And, Jesus says "How hard it is for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!"

Add to these stories today's parable of the Farmer who produced an abundant crop, so abundant he had to tear down his old barn and build a new one to fit it all and how proud it made him to look at his big barn, and just as he prepares to bask in the glory of his new barn, God calls him home and reminds him that none of the barn comes with him: "So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God" Jesus tells those listening.

It definitely seems like the relationship between discipleship and money is pretty grim in Luke's gospel

The one exception being Zacchaeus in chapter 19.

Zacchaeus is a tax collector (*shudder!*) - but, he welcomes Jesus at his home for a meal and at this gathering he promises to give away half of his possessions and to pay back those he has defrauded fourfold!

Ultimately, Zacchaeus is lifted up as an exemplary disciple – the one who welcomes Jesus, gives up his wealth, and pays reparations...the model disciple

Are we uncomfortable yet?

All these stories and all this money talk is very uncomfortable for those of us who have been reared in a capitalist society – I say that as a simple fact, not as a judgment

In our capitalist society, the greatest measure of status that one not only can but should strive for is money (wealth, riches, treasures)

But capitalism wasn't the economic system 2,000 years ago

Capitalism entered society in the late 18th century

In Jesus' time, it was more like a feudal system of rich land owners and slave labor

Interesting to note that across time and across economic systems, money has been a hot topic and considered an impediment to discipleship

Whether we're slaves to capitalism or slaves to rich land owners, "money" gets in the way

Is it money that's the impediment? Or is it the mindset around money?

Maybe, yes? Both!

A story about money: when I graduated college in 2007 it was really difficult to find a job – it was the beginning of the 2008 recession and I found myself

working back at my alma mater, Wheaton College in Mass, and I reached out to a local non-profit and asked if they wanted a free development intern

I had worked in the College Advancement office while a student and was curious about making fundraising my career

The local nonprofit said “yes” (did I mention I told them I’d work for free?) and for the first year with them, I worked a few days a week and helped with their major fundraising event - a Gala

Early on, I was given a list of people and business owners who had donated to the previous gala – items for an auction, money as sponsorships, that sort of thing – and I was tasked with calling these folks to see if they wanted to contribute to this year’s gala

And, I remember sitting at the little desk that they gave me with the list of names and phone numbers in front of me and a telephone (yes, the kind that plugged into the wall and you pushed buttons to dial) on the corner of the desk

I looked from the list to the phone, list to the phone, list to the phone

My hands started sweating and I just couldn’t pick up the phone

“I can’t ask people for money!” I thought, “It’s rude! It’s private!”

It took me a few days and a few calls to realize: I wasn’t asking for money for myself! I was asking people who already cared about this organization to contribute/invest in its continued success and in the health of the people we served

Development is more than fundraising, it’s aligning our resources with our values and making a difference

The calls became not about money specifically, but about relationship, shared values, shared commitment to make a difference, shared desire to see a better, safer community

Money was the vehicle, community change was the goal

Money isn't inherently good and it's not inherently evil – and it matters how we use it and our relationship to it

The farmer in Jesus' parable this morning has an inner dialog that's very revealing: "What should I do, for I have no place to store *my* crops?...I will pull down *my* barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all *my* grain and *my* goods. And I will say to *my* soul, 'Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.'"

Debie Thomas comments: "In the carefully curated narrative of a proud, self-made man, Jesus sees an isolated, insecure soul who has forgotten human connection...forgotten that possession is not stewardship"<sup>1</sup>

The farmer worries most about "what shall I do?" and "How do I store *my* assets?" – he doesn't look around and say "I have plenty! What can I do to lift up my neighbors?"

Which, when it comes down to the basics, is what Jesus would ask him to do - ask all of us to do

Jesus sums up his commandments, time and again, by asking us to love God and love our neighbor

At the nonprofits where I've worked, I've witnessed so many examples of how people have shown love for neighbor specifically with money, folks embodying a discipleship like Zacchaeus

The farmer in Jesus' parable, while not seemingly a bad guy, seems to be thinking only about himself

It is about the money itself

And, it is about the mindset we have about money

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/essays/2291-rich-toward-god>

The second half of Jesus' command is to love our neighbor, but the first is to love God – or phrased differently, to be in a loving relationship with God (it's mutual!)

The Farmer in Jesus' parable seems to not only neglect neighbor, but neglects his relationship with God

For the Farmer, the thing that matters most is his accumulation and storage of wealth – the barn is the greatest symbol of his worth

the barn is the greatest symbol of his worth

I'll give you a guess at how much God cares about the barn...

God isn't looking at the barn, God is looking at you

David Lose notes: "The farmer is called "fool" because...he accords finite things infinite value."

"Can our wealth secure a relative degree of comfort? Certainly," Lose writes. "Can it grant to us confidence that we are worthy of love and honor and in right relationship with God and neighbor? Certainly not."<sup>2</sup>

The farmer accords finite things infinite value

The barn is the greatest symbol of his worth – to God, the farmer is worthy of love as a beloved child of God by virtue of being alive

the symbol, or symbols as the case may be, of our worth is how we nurture our relationship with God, our love of God and our love of neighbor

So is it money or the mindset around money Jesus doesn't seem to be the biggest fan of?

Yes!

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-18-3/commentary-on-luke-1213-21>

Did Jesus make you a little uncomfortable this morning?

Me, too!

Thanks be to God. Amen.