

“Our Money Story - Release”
Deuteronomy 15:1-11; Matthew 19:16-22
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Like all money stories, my own was rooted in something much deeper than money. My grandparents lived through the depression. The grandparent who lived on a farm in SC knew real hunger, scarcity, and the fear that came from it. She made it her life's goal to insulate herself and her children from it, by insisting that her family valued and pursued formal education, and by saving everything. I mean *everything* - from reusing plastic bags to saving twist ties from bread bags. I was raised in a family where you eat everything on your plate, you learn to be happy with what you have, and above all else, you do not go into debt. Doing-it-yourself was a family value, along with shunning fashion, and excess of every kind. I remember my mother taking my father's worn out dress shirts, and painstakingly removing and reversing the collar to give them a second life. To this day, my own kids and their cousins laugh about finding a half a piece of lettuce stored in my parents' refrigerator or water added to the ketchup bottle to get that last little bit. And then there was church. In our Sunday school class last week, Tom and Taylor Stewart asked us to remember our first memory of money. I'm pretty sure my first memory is of the offering envelopes from church into which I was expected to place a coin every week and put it in the plate. Money given to the church is my first money memory.

For me, these personal ways of living were explicitly connected to the teachings of our faith and the impact my living would have on the rest of the world. When I showed too much greed my parents would patiently remind me that I was better off than most of the children of the world. When I complained about lacking the status symbols of my suburban childhood - being forced to wear Saddlebred shirts instead of Polos, carry a no name 3 ring binder instead of a Trapper Keeper, wearing a jacket from JC Penny instead of a Member's Only, my parents would scoff at my status-oriented sin.

Reading the money stories from the Bible today, I hear my childhood reinforced. God says, I care about the poor of the world and for that reason you will open your hand, willingly. You will open your hand generously. You will think about others before you think of yourself. You will put only on your plate what you will finish, you will shun excess of every kind, you will not take more from the earth or from the marketplace than what you need to live.

From talking with others who have enough money to put food on the table, to keep a roof over their heads - which is most of us gathered today - I've learned that many of you hear these texts in similar ways. Generosity is a command. And simple

living is a kind of doleful duty as is giving to the church. Just this week I was on a zoom call with a co-conspirator in changing Baltimore - a wealthy man - who half apologized for the magnificent library where he sat, participating in the call. "I know I shouldn't love this room too much, but I do." His language reflected an opposition of duty and desire. - I know I shouldn't love this too much. . .but I do." I shouldn't tell you this," I said, but I'm just now reading in Matthew's Gospel how hard it will be for a rich man to enter the kingdom."

The rich man views Jesus' command to sell and give as I always have - the doleful duty. Too difficult for most, undertaken only by those who are able to suppress their desires which are in opposition to God's will for their lives. The text is clear - radical generosity is not optional in either Deuteronomy or Matthew - it is command. And from these commands grow our most progressive public policies that measure the wellbeing of a community, of a nation by how well the poor among us fare. It is that strident call for justice that I have supported many times and will continue to support - in our personal and public lives. A nation cannot long stand that leaves such a stark contrast between those at the top who own so much while the vast majority own so very little. This is the prophetic call to stand with the poor, and on the side of justice. That call grows from these unambiguous texts.

And yet sometimes I wonder if this kind of prophetic call for justice has become shrill and easily dismissed because we've missed the essential good news that undergirds it.

We are now in a period where historians are actively working to correct versions of history of the past that neglected to acknowledge much less contend with the colonialism afoot on our shores before and during its founding, the genocide of native peoples, and the hypocrisy of white, landowning men who enslaved human beings while declaring that all men are created equal. It's important that we tell that whole history. I'm glad for the corrections.

At the same time, Marilynne Robinson pointed out recently, the idea at the root of the founding of our nation is still worthy of our attention. The idea that "human beings are sacred, therefore equal. We are," she writes, "asked to see one another in the light of a singular inalienable worth that would make a family of us if we let it.. .The ethic in these words should be the standard by which we judge ourselves, our social arrangements, our dealings with the vast family of humankind. It will always find us wanting. The idea," she writes, "is a progressive force, constantly and necessarily exposing our failures and showing us new paths forward."¹

That idea is not a doleful duty. It is a liberating word - that you and I are sacred as is every human being. That we are all more than the worst of what we have done in the words of Bryan Stevenson. And when we know that gospel truth, then we become

¹ Marilynne Robinson, "Don't Give Up on America," *The New York Times*, October 9, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/10/09/opinion/sunday/america-patriotism.html>

much more generous, not just with our money but with our whole selves. God's commandments become the blueprints for our living instead of the switches for our spankings; the light that illumines our paths instead of the forensics for our failures.

Which is the essential message that I mis-understood in my childhood. You see, I learned in my money story not only that what I desired was in opposition to God's way, but that for most of us, desire itself is in opposition to God's way. That Christian faith is opposed to those desires - the Polo shirt, the Trapper Keeper, the Members Only Jacket. And I can see now that this basic belief informed all kinds of life choices - including to become a pastor in the church - driven by a desire to do what is right, what God commands.

But real generosity, the kind that springs from the heart, cannot grow from that barren soil. I finally learned this last summer. On sabbatical, my marriage already in trouble, I learned it from the monks of Taize, in southern France. There is nothing like a personal crisis to center your prayer life and Taize organized that prayer for me - we prayed in the morning, we prayed in the middle of the day. We prayed at night. A few of you have been to Taize. You know how moving it is to be praying with thousands of young people from all over the world, praying fervently on their knees, a symphony of silence held by a demographic stereotyped for its noise. At morning Bible study, a monk re-educated me in the roots of call and faith and generosity. So many people, he told us, imagine that monks are taught to suppress their desires. That the vows that we take of poverty and chastity and service require us to do what God wants in opposition to what we want. This is the opposite of faith, he told us. Walking us through a biblical text to show us treasure hidden in plain sight, he said to us, at Taize we learn to welcome our desires, to examine them to see exactly where they lead. We need not fear them, he said, because they lead us toward the love of God, of ourselves, of each other.

This is where Jesus leads, if we let him. When I finally followed him down into the depth of my own heart I discovered that underneath those consumerist desires of my youth for shirts and things, those vocational desires to give and serve, those prophetic desires to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, was a desire to be valued, recognized, known and loved myself. There is nothing wrong or disordered about that desire. It is the most holy thing we could ever pursue. It's just that a shirt, or any other thing cannot fulfill it. It can only be fulfilled when we truly value each other including ourselves, as the sacred human beings that we are, the root theology that would liberate our hearts and our society if we had the courage to let it.

It was hard to release that old story, because so much of my life and faith was constructed on its scaffolding. Though I have preached a gospel of grace I can see now that I have acted more like a person trying to demonstrate his worth. But my worth, like yours, has never been in question. What is up for grabs is the depth to which we can

accept that sacred worth - of ourselves and others - including the worst of our enemies - and then live accordingly, forgiving debts, spiritual and material, to get us closer toward the human family that is already fact whether we acknowledge it or not.

You see, what the rich man missed in this text is how much freedom is on the other side of being liberated from your stuff. It is not just what it would do for the poor, though that would be a miracle in and of itself. It is what it would do for all of us if we truly put our value in loving God and others as much as God loves us. It's what it would do for our church. It's what it would do for our city. It's what it would do for our nation and our world. A whole new economy based on our true worth.

God doesn't wait around for the rich to discover the root of true generosity in order to deliver justice for the poor. This is clear from God's story. The rich man goes away sad. Jesus continues on his way, proclaiming the kingdom. The prophetic call to reorder our systems, to acknowledge the scars of white supremacy that made Baltimore and our country the way that it is - those must continue whether or not hearts are transformed and lives are changed. Even so, I hope you do discover your place in God's unfolding story. I hope you get beyond the doleful duty to do what is required with your life, to experience for yourself the liberating love of God at the root of life itself.