

SAYINGS OF JESUS
MONEY MATTERS

Text on Sunday, October 17, 2010

Luke 12: 16-22, 30-34; Gen 11: 31—12: 1-5

Much of what you hear said in churches about money does not belong in churches. That's not because it's wrong to talk about your money in church; no doubt you've heard the little fact that money is the matter in more of Jesus' sayings than any other subject—by a factor of two or three—so church talk should follow the Master in this, too.

Here's what's the matter in churchy money talks. Some try to make use of guilty feelings. Wrong. People who give from guilt are gone from God. We must invite them back. Some aim to goad all givers to get their gifts up by an equal sum. Wrong. This is harder on those who have it hard and easier on the easy. I know that's the American way these last thirty years, but it is not Jesus' way. Some say only church-giving is giving to God. In the King James Version, Psalm 50 v. 9 reads "I will take no bull from thy house." Well friends, that's bull—and I have a fiduciary responsibility to assure you that the electric company, the repair man, and your loyal staff did indeed receive the assigned portions of your contributions, and I did not see God angling for a share. But seriously, God doesn't want things. God wants you. You can't give any thing to God! You can only give yourself to God by means of money. Or hide your self from God, by means of money. So "present your *bodies* as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, for this is your spiritual worship," writes the apostle. (Rom 12.2)

Money matters here in a way completely different from any other money talk. Everywhere else—whether it's product advertisements or college tuition letters or investment advice or charitable gift requests—they are telling you what a good value you'll get for your money. Churchy money talk often falls into line with that effort, trying to persuade you that we too deliver the goods. But if the main work of the church of Jesus Christ is, like Jesus himself, to help us to see our self truly, to know our self truly, to love our self truly—so that we might open up like a lotus flower to the light from above—then money matters here primarily as a means to experience the flow of living faith, to test that faith and try it to see by means of your relationship with money how you are walking on the road God sends you.

Consider Terah. Now, you may not have heard of Terah till today. He was Abram's father. Curious, isn't it, that Jews and Christians call themselves children of Abraham, but not children of Terah? If I found out the name of my umpteenth grandpa, I'd put him at the top of my tree. Why don't we do that with Terah? Terah, we're told, set out from Ur for Canaan, the promised land. He took his sons and their wives with him on this trek, "but when they came to Haran, they settled there." What can the parable mean?

The journey from Ur to to Haran is 600 miles, but it was not especially hard. Rivers—the interstate highways of old—are flowing beside Terah and his company all the way from Ur of the Chaldees to Haran. They have water. They're all right. Why stop in Haran? Sixty years later, the legend has it, Terah died in Haran. Why? Haran means "parched"—too dry. Now what fool would stop over in a town named "Parched?" Did he name it himself the day he ran out of spirit and hope? Is it just part of the legend? It doesn't matter. It's an exaggeration, anyway—like calling your town Mudville. No one lives in mud. No one lives sixty years without water. But sometimes we live parched, thirsting for something more, but too spent by our habits and emotions to search for what satisfies as no thing on earth can satisfy.

What's the trouble with Terah? A Bible map shows that Terah's journey begins in Ur on the east side of the Euphrates. To get to Canaan, he will have to cross that great river at some point. He will have to leave it behind and, with all his creatures and family, head west over dry hills. But Terah has a lot invested in this journey. Hundreds of sheep and goats, and all the tents and gear and servants keeping the herds safe and watered. For Terah, the river is what money is to us. His wealth and his way of being in the world depend on that river. He tastes more satisfaction in the fine things this flow brings to his family each night than from that strange promise from heaven of Canaan, that vague prayer. Tents safe for sleep and

desire. Lamb chops. Silk from India. Prestige. The promise of God is faded.

Har-an' lies near the source of a branch of waters flowing down into the Euphrates some 500 miles north of Ur. Surveying the confluence of these rivers from the east, Terah sees that the Euphrates, his life-line and his guide toward Canaan, is flowing from the west beyond the banks of this new river. But even now he won't cross. He makes his company turn north, sticking to the safe side of the waters. He will not risk the depths. He will not leave what he can taste and see. Money matters more, that's all. It is more real than the word of God. He has lost his faith and has nothing to say to the children of God. That's the trouble with Terah.

Terah choosing Haran and losing Canaan stands for a temptation that confronts each one of us on the road of our life, the road God sends us on. It is the same temptation Jesus set forth in the parable of a man so rich he finds he has more wealth than he can shelter. To try to stay in the electric flow of this experience, this sense of reality, he decides to rework his whole investment strategy to try to keep everything the workers bring him from the fields. Just like Terah, he can't let go of anything. All his energies, he thinks, will now go into tearing down the old structures—bank regulation, right?—and constructing new shelters and restructuring the laws, all so he can keep just plain everything. Then he'll throw a tea party, and say, "Self, you are rich from now on. Relax. Live it up."

But let's get real. What drives him is his depths. What I mean is, the reason money matters so much to us is that it we long to taste life, to feel the pulsing energies of our hungers and satisfactions in love and work and play and even especially in our imagination of the future. Why, this rich man is no different from one of us poring over a retirement portfolio, happy if it shows we "have ample goods laid up for many years" and can relax—and deeply anxious if we don't. Don't church money worries look terribly like Terah's when leaders won't cross the rivers always known to us to seek a land never yet shown to us? Money is always involved in our attempts to control the flow and voltage in the current of vital experience. These unconscious hungers for depths—for God—drive us to work and work and work, drive us to drink, drive us to death.

But we are a creature with two natures. One, embodied, mortal, historical, instinctual, habitual, reactive—a bear. The other spiritual, unbounded, eternal, conscious, free—a child of God, not flesh. A human cannot be one without the other; this sounds obvious. But through history, schemes abound by which we have tried to stake ourselves either to spirit, as if the world and its flesh were evil; or stake ourselves to this world, as if spirit and the breath of God were not in us at all. How else shall we interpret the puritanical, Talibanesque efforts of the Protestant tradition to segregate Sunday from all other days, and ideas of love from all other loves, and church giving from all other giving, and thoughts about God from all other thoughts? This mania was driven by a desire to deny our own death and our own uncertainty; indeed, to remove the risk and adventure of experiencing the reality of God substituting for it notions and assertions about the nature of God.

And how did modernity react to its puritan phase? By denying altogether the reality of God and the possibility of experiencing the divine. By substituting for it the vividness of experiencing money, of desiring and wishing and buying into a meaningful, happy life . . . tomorrow. Tomorrow! *"Fool, do you not know that this very night, your soul is required of you? . . . Do not worry about your life, what you will eat, or about your body, what you will wear. . . Your Father knows that you need them. But strive instead for God's kingdom, and these things will be given to you as well."*

What is it, to seek the kingdom? You see that it cannot refer to that one-natured, one-sided puritanical drive to deny our material nature, which leads only to hypocrisy and injustice. To seek the kingdom of God must mean that we become more conscious of our two natures, of the relationship between what is higher and lower, between heaven and earth, between God and creature. More conscious of earth, in order to become more conscious of heaven. Never in the teaching of Jesus is this body or this world

thought evil. There is no dualism there. Writing on this subject, the philosopher Jacob Needleman says the focus on material things is not evil, is not a sin. Rather, materialism is just a mistake about reality. Evil is only that which prevents conscious relationship between our higher and lower natures. Evil is only that which prevents us from feeling our need of faith to cross from the east bank of the river of money into the experience of God, walking on earth.

Where are you? Who are you? How does money speak for you—hide you—mask you—vex you? How do you give yourself to God? These are questions that belong uniquely to a community of the spiritually mature. At the Presbyterian Multi-Cultural Church Conference last April, Rev. Jin Kim, pastor of the Church of All Nations in Minneapolis, told a group that his church is becoming serious about how money matters in Christian life. Leaders there teach this idea. *Take tithing seriously, which is giving away one tenth of your income for works of God you do not control. If you do not trust this church to make good use of your tithe, then by all means take your tithe to a church you do trust. But do not cheat yourself of the opportunity to discover who you are, experimenting and learning how money matters in your walk with God and truth by giving it away generously.*

You know, it is not so awful to hear yourself called *Fool!* when it is the Spirit of God speaking within. Because it is God speaking. Early in 2009, I was living in my nice house in Buffalo while the ruined economy took my life savings, like yours, down an alley and broke its face and its back and made the idea of a comfortable retirement look foolish. One night, I woke up to the error of my living cautiously there, where I no longer had a calling, treating those remaining funds as if they were stored in barns for another day, when I would be weak. Taking a big breath, a breath of God, I hoped, I left that town and came to live in this one, having no job, utterly without certainties how matters would turn, but faithful, at last, not unfaithful. I crossed a river in my mind and fear and came here seeking friends to support me in my desire to give myself to the question of higher and lower, of heaven and earth—to seek the kingdom of heaven, in a word.

Now I tell that story not to impress you with heroism. The curious thing is, I have comforts now I had not twenty months ago, so the question of how money matters now, how I may become aware of my freedom and my bondage now—this is just as urgent, confusing, and unresolved for me as for any of you. Yet a story has a function, nevertheless. It is a testimony to the vivid experience of the holy dove moving in me. It opens a space in the flow of reactions and feelings and fears. It presents—it re-presents to mind—the possibility of Jacob, in that night after he had left all his goods behind, when waking from his dream of the ladder touching heaven and earth, he declared, “God is in this place, and I did not know it.” To give that renewed confidence is how our best stories serve us

Friends, consciousness is that one thing more precious than gold, that one experience more vivid than all the hungers our bodies feel and thrill to. Yet if we do nothing to invite and excite our consciousness of this precious space we are invited to inhabit—the space between heaven and earth, where Jacob’s ladder rises—then our lives feel dull, and our minds are drawn to all that glitters, and our faith goes dumb and we have nothing to say to the children. Near the end of a book that inquires deeply into the matters we are considering today, Needleman writes “You know that you must change your life—and that this can happen only by searching for companions and conditions that will support the appearance of this moment of opening.” (*Money and the Meaning of Life*, p. 298) May your church always serve you in this way, that you may learn with others how to cross the river over the river we have always known to the land, so that we may indeed become children with Abraham, children of the promise. Do not hold back. Cross over. Become very generous in your giving all through your life. Enter on the faithful adventure who knows how money matters.

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