

Our Money Story: Remember

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Sunday, November 3, 2024

First Congregational United Church of Christ, Gaylord, Michigan

Texts: Luke 22: 1-23 and Exodus 16: 1-18

Let us pray:

Giving and loving God,

I am made of stories--

stories of heartbreak and triumph,

stories of love and tragedy,

stories of families who belong and families who break,

stories of loose ends and new beginnings.

I have absorbed stories that live in me like an internal compass, and many that I do not wish to carry at all.

But your story remains steadfast: I am loved. I am enough. There is enough for all.

Enough. Enough. Enough.

May this become my constant refrain.

May I believe this is who I am.

May I live trusting your holy design.

Enough. Enough. Enough.

Amen.

We all have lots of money stories. One of my best memories is when Grandma and Grandpa Watling would give each of us kids a little Gerber food jar with coins in it. They were mostly pennies, but I got excited nonetheless. It wasn't about the money. Or was it? I don't remember. But today, I remember that they thought of me and brought something to me. It wasn't about the cost, but about being remembered, thought of, cared about. You see, money can do many things. It can do good things when used the right way, or it can mean power over someone, or manipulation, or other harm. Today, we begin our series about our Money Story and each of us are invited to ponder what our money story has been over the years. What do you remember about growing up and money? Your early years? Your later years? Was money used as a weapon? Was it a tool? Was there enough? Was there never enough? There are so many events, questions and people that go into our money story. All of them impact how we view our money today.

Earlier in the service, I mentioned that there is a devotional available for this series. I took advantage of that resource and spent some time remembering this week. It led me to the fond memory of my grandparents and the change. Not all of my memories of my grandparents are so great, and therefore it was cool to bring up a good one. It made me think

of the following themes that I'm sure you'll hear more about in the coming weeks: You have power over money, not the other way around; Scarcity breeds fear, which can lead to poor decisions and more scarcity; Money can be addictive, maybe that's why we're so secretive about it; Money can bring hope, but it can also bring imperialism, colonialism, and slavery; and Money is a tool -- how that tool is used is up to us.

To begin this discussion, we're going to take a special look at the last supper. It seems appropriate on this All Saints Sunday that is also a Communion Sunday. We've heard the story, but like many Bible stories, we've missed a lot of what is going on here. We've gotten all caught up in what happened at the meal, and missed several other things that were going on at the same time. With the help of Lisle Gwynn Garrity, let me elaborate.

"Peter and John go to prepare the Passover meal in the home of a generous stranger." Ok, stop right there. Had you thought about where the Last Supper was held? We spend so much time arguing about which picture is the most accurate that we miss the location of the meal. None of the disciples were the hosts of this meal, and Jesus, well, he didn't own a home. He just tells the disciples to go to this place and prepare a meal. Did Jesus know the person? Maybe. But whether he knew the owner or not, someone who was not one of the twelve and not Jesus was the host of the Passover meal. There was a generous stranger (at least a stranger to the disciples) who provided the space and the meal for the Last Supper. Jesus and the disciples were the recipients of someone else's hospitality. Does that make you think anything about how the church serves communion and who is invited?

"Meanwhile, Judas satiates the desires of the chief priests and legal experts by cutting a deal with them. Many of us quickly condemn Judas' betrayal as cowardly and weak. But we are privileged to know the end of this story, which makes judgment more enticing than empathy."

At the same time, we have to consider what we've been willing to do for money. Some of us have taken jobs that paid us well, but sucked the life out of us. Some of us have taken jobs that paid the bills, but at the same time forced us to live and work in ways counter to our values. It's easy to judge what someone else does for money until we take a look at what we've done with it, how we've made it, how we've invested it, and how we've benefitted from the pain of someone else. Just making Judas into the human he was.

"Judas did not know how the narrative would play out. He knew what Jesus had told them about their fate, painting a picture of doom and terror: the temple demolished, nations at war, food shortages, epidemics, harassment and torture from the authorities, betrayal by loved ones, hatred from strangers, possible execution by the state (Luke 21: 5-19)." Not exactly a recruiting poster for being a Christian. Judas was afraid. And when we're afraid, we can sure make some poor decisions, especially where money is concerned.

"In the face of so much uncertainty and fear for the future, how might you behave?"

How are we behaving this election week? "Judas wants the nightmare to end. He wants security, assurance, quick relief. He wants to go back to how things used to be. And so, evil enters into Judas' story like ink spilled across the page." What have we done or not done to give ourselves security, assurance and quick relief? Have we ever wanted things to go back to how they used to be?

"Scarcity and fear and conflict will always threaten to dismember our story." That's true. But look what Jesus does. Amid the crisis that is brewing and his likely knowledge of Judas (or one of the others?) actions, Jesus doesn't let the story of Judas end here. "Instead he welcomes him to the table -- a table where fear and doubt and difference have a place too. He offers him a meal where brokenness just makes more to pass around. He pours into a common cup that promises a new way forward."

We think that Judas' actions were all about thirty pieces of silver. The amount was equal to anything from six weeks to six months pay, depending on who you ask. It wasn't going to solve all of Judas' issues financially. We have reduced all that took place with Judas and Jesus to the money. We do that with a lot of things. We seem to think that people do evil things just for the money, without really asking how much money, or what they did with the money, or any other questions. It is as if we believe that money runs the show. We seem to believe that money was all there was to it for Judas. And yet, for six month's wages, would we take that action? We might, but I bet we'd do it for a bigger reason than money.

That is the point of this first week. Money may be part of an event or a series of events in our lives. Like my grandparents change jars -- not a lot of money, but a good memory of relationship. Like Judas' betrayal of Jesus -- not a huge amount of money, but it destroyed a lot relationships and destroyed Judas himself. When we think about our money we think it holds all the power -- that it is the single determining factor in how our lives take shape. At the same time, we have example after example of people with nothing that changed the world, and people with everything that were self-destructive and harmful. It just goes to show there's more to our lives than our money. We nod our head in agreement, but how do we live?

How we make our money, spend our money, hoard our money, save our money, share our money, give our money, is much more than a calculation of it's financial value. What we do with our money is part of a larger story of who we are, what has happened to us, and where we wish to be in the world. I invite you to explore your money story. I've found the resources from Sanctified Art to be moving and powerful. Maybe you will as well. Even if not, this week, I hope you'll take some time to stroll down memory lane and ask yourself about your history with money and all the relationships that impact what you do with your money. I hope you'll learn something like I did.

In the many blessed names of God. Amen.