“RELEASE”

A sermon preached by Margaret Wallin

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 Today, we examine the second of four topics concerning our money story. As Greg pointed out last week, we all have a money story. We can look back and remember some of the key moments in our history in which we formulated our beliefs [convictions really] of the meaning and value of money. We remember again that Jesus spoke about money matters more than any other topic. Over and over again, Jesus reflects on the dangers of being caught up in acquiring wealth and power. Repetition is one of the key ways that we know what is truly important in the scriptures. The fact that Jesus repeatedly spoke about money, addressed the issues of rich and poor is an indicator of the importance he placed on our right thinking concerning wealth. More than prayer, more than sin, more than, well, you name it. Money, the way we think about it, the way we use it or hoard it, and its tendencies to disrupt our spiritual wellbeing, were all of grave concern to Jesus.

 We look at our money story and consider what parts of it are perhaps holding us back from realizing the goal – the joy really – of being true followers of Jesus. We ask ourselves “what do we need to release in order to more fully enter into that close and more right-minded relationship with each other, our world, and our creator?”

 Society has not always (if ever) been truly kind to the poor, and its attitude can further harm those who already suffer. Those of us with ample means too often consider the poor to somehow deserve their plight, without any need to discern the actual causes of their condition. Those suffering deprivation may translate that treatment into an attitude towards themselves and other that is not helpful to their circumstances. Also, it is far too easy for the wealthy to forget, or ignore, the advantages/privileges that helped them get where they are.

I once accompanied a young woman to the Office of Human Services. Although we had an appointment, we were kept waiting for an extended period of time. When I inquired at the window about how long it was likely to be, I was treated with disdain. It seems that the poor were thought to have no reason to get things on time. No apology, no explanation. I was unaccustomed to such treatment, and was affronted by it. The young person I was with, in order to lend my support mind you, had grown up in the welfare system and was not at all surprised by these events, it was normal. It was an eye-opener for me. If we expect people to have the hope necessary to put forth efforts, we would do well to examine how we treat those in need.

Each of us of course comes at money issues from our own story. If you grew up in want, where there was often insufficient supply of funds for nutritious food on the table, or to pay the rent or mortgage without concern, your story is different than one who came up in a relatively stable, wealthy home where the biggest concern may have been how to keep the most of what you had or to guard against those who would attempt to bleed you. And do not discount being the child of one who perhaps grew up in the Depression Era. The experiences of parents cannot help but affect the attitudes of their children. Whether the experience was of want or plenty, either may germinate great desire, anxiety, shame, or other strong feelings about keeping accumulating and protecting wealth. Either may believe in their heart of hearts that money is what makes the world go round, so better get and keep as much as possible for protection.

Our various money stories may also include later experiences that can trigger feelings of insecurity or a deep-seated need to accumulate (maybe even hoard) things that seem to provide us with a sense of security. But the important point is that, WHATEVER the feelings generated by our money story, we are not necessarily at fault for that history, and there is no need to attach shame to our feelings, whatever they may be.

But ALSO, we need to realize that we ARE NOT bound to continue forever how we process that history, or the decisions we make around it. We can in fact determine to RELEASE (a little at a time, likely) whatever negative effects our money story may have sparked in us. Our history informs our lives, a natural consequence of being human. However, here is the thing: we need NOT remain captive to it.

 The story in our Gospel reading this morning about the rich young man who desires eternal life, shows up in all three synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke). In each instance, the story is remarkably consistent in its content and context. In each case, the rich young man seeks to know what he must do to gain eternal life, and asserts that he has followed all the commandments (the Big 10) since a young child, and is then heartbroken by Jesus’ direction to sell all he has and give the proceeds to the poor.

 And it’s not like this is a really new thing or just with Jesus. Our reading from Deuteronomy provides clarity that from the early times, when God was engaged in the initial shaping of God’s chosen people, Israel, that riches and debt were of great concern. Deuteronomy provides the instructions for Israel as they enter the promised land after having been wandering for 40 years in the wilderness. The 10 commandments can be found in Deuteronomy 5:6-21 (as well as Exodus). During the 40 years of wandering, God has worked on this covenant people to impress upon them the need to rely upon God and to follow God’s commandments, **so that the people might live well and long in the new land.**

One of the Biblical Big 10, is that God’s people are to keep the Sabbath and make it holy. All kinds of rules were created around what it meant to honor the Sabbath commandment. Sabbath at its root means cessation. We are familiar with a Sabbath Day every 7 days, a day set apart for rest and reflection on the holy. This morning’s reading further explains that there should be a sabbath year. A year in which all debts are forgiven, and all persons who have sold themselves into slavery to pay off a debt should be freed! Now, you notice that God’s instructions anticipate the rather natural human desire to lessen the economic effects of this commandment. And so, God instructs that the approach of the 7th year should not be grounds for being unwilling to loan money or provide for those who may be financially struggling. The Sabbath year frees all Israelites from debt, frees those enslaved in an effort to repay debt, and even leaves the fields to be fallow, and the people all then free to forage and glean for food. Can you even imagine imposing such a commandment today? Just think on that for a second or two! How would our communal lives be different if this command were codified and enforced in law?

The commandment is clear: those who had funds, had successfully built-up reserves, had been fortunate in their successes, were to be generous with their neighbors who were in need. And if you thought you could be stingy because the 7th year was approaching, “Woe to you, oh mortal,” should the needy whom you have denied help call upon God!

Richard Donovan tells the story of a middle-aged man who came to talk to his pastor. He was depressed. His life seemed meaningless. He had been quite successful, but his money didn't seem to be buying him happiness. Something seemed to be missing. His life felt flat. He thought that he should be getting more pleasure out of his success, and he was trying to figure out what to do.

The pastor in a moment of brilliance, remembered something that Karl Menninger, the famous psychiatrist, had said about the remedy for feeling down. Menninger contended that, to counter an attack of the blues, you should get out of the house, go across the tracks, find someone in need, and help them. Having had a moment of brilliance, the pastor shared Menninger’s theory with the man, and said, "Perhaps you should use your money to help people in need––give some of it away."

The man thought for a long moment, and then, with a wry smile on his face said, "Pastor, I'm just not sure that I'm that desperate."

We do get attached to the stuff of our lives, don’t we? Sometimes it is as if we don’t know enough to let go of what we have so that we can receive something even better. It reminds me of the way that some hunters entrap monkeys by placing an enticing treat in a gourd, with a hole just big enough that the monkey can reach in, but that is so small the monkey cannot bring their hand back out of the gourd while holding the treat. We tend to cling to our things, our money, and whatever we feel we need for our security. But hanging on to our stuff, whether it be money, things, or power, can be a real block to spiritual development, and a detriment to our proper reliance upon our living, loving God.

Alan Brehm, in his sermon entitled “Attachments,” shared that he had been greatly influenced by a mission trip he made to Romania after the fall of Ceausescu. He observed in the wake of great humanitarian need:

 . . . that the church in Eastern Europe, contrary to all expectations, was actually **thriving** under their various authoritarian governments.  The **deprivations** they had to endure seemed to make their faith deeper, stronger, and more central to their daily lives.  By contrast, the churches in Western Europe languished.  Though there were some free churches that were holding their own, huge cathedrals all over Europe sat mostly empty week after week.  One mission leader suggested that the deprivations of life in Eastern Europe seemed to make their faith thrive, while the prosperity of the West seemed to choke the very life out of faith.[2]

The Scriptures and the Christian tradition have been consistent from the start: there is something about wealth that has a way of taking over your heart and life. [3]  It is unavoidable.  Jesus said it this way: “you cannot serve God and wealth” (Matt. 6:24).

 He wasn’t the first to say it, of course.  The prophets are replete with warnings against the dangers of wealth. In the Gospels Jesus echoed the prophetic warnings. For example, In the parable of the Sower he said that the seed in the thorny ground didn’t bear fruit because “the cares of the world, and the **lure of wealth**, and the desire for other things come in and choke the word, and it yields nothing” (Mk 4:19).  The challenge is clear—one can either embrace **wealth** or one can embrace **faith**.

Brehm continues:

It’s incredibly easy to justify our love of wealth.  . . . We live in a society where the accumulation of wealth is not only encouraged, it is positively necessary if one wants to avoid being destitute in retirement!  So how can we possibly hear Jesus’ challenge to choose either faith or wealth?   I’m not sure many of us ever do. We get incredibly attached to our stuff.  We’re proud of our possessions.  It’s next to impossible to let our favorite things go.  And in all of this, we can be positively blind to what our wealth does to us—and what it does to the way we treat those we view as “beneath” us.

So how do we avoid making the mistake the man in our Gospel lesson made?  First and foremost, we must recognize that “doing justice, loving mercy, and walking humbly with God” [you know, the Micah quote of what is required of the faithful] means caring about poverty and the suffering it spawns in our world.  Throughout the Scriptures, from Genesis to Revelation, the heart and soul of what God wants from us is to practice mercy, compassion, and generosity to others.[9]  . . . .  And I think we must recognize our own attachment to the wealth we cherish.  . . .When we can admit our attachment to our wealth, then we can remember that the saints and heroes of our faith have consistently taught us that the only way to free ourselves from our wealth is to give as much of it away as we possibly can!

In closing, I want to share with you the poem that is included as an insert in your bulletin. It expresses so nicely the concept of RELEASE. . Just listen for now, and may you be blessed!