

“Our Money Story: Release”  
Deuteronomy 15:1-11 & Matthew 19:16-22

I recently had a conversation with a member of our community who asked me about eternal life. He wanted to hear an assuring message about life after death. It is not unusual for a religious leader to hear this kind of question as it is one of the great mysteries of life. And so Jesus received this question from a man who was rich. We may be tempted to think that Jesus' response was a tit for tat kind of deal. If the young man agreed to sell his possessions and to follow Jesus, he would then be eligible to enter this elite club of eternal life. This makes God's grace and love conditional and we would have to throw away Jesus' words a few verses later about nothing being impossible for God and about the last will be first in the kingdom of God. What Jesus was offering this man was an opportunity to release what was holding him back from living life abundantly. The man wanted to do good deeds to earn God's favor. But Jesus offered him an opportunity for a life of transformation. In order for this man to be a part of God's reign, he had to release whatever was holding him back. It was his participation in a social system that was opposite to God's vision for the people of ancient Israel. The realities of the time of Jesus were so different from what God had envisioned and commanded when Moses led the people out of slavery in Egypt.

By these standards, no one should have been left behind and no one should have gotten too rich like this young man. God helped the Israelites under the leadership of Moses to get out of Egypt and to establish a different kind of society than that of the Egyptians. Their religious, political, social, and economic systems were supposed to help them avoid the ways of slavery and the vision of fear and scarcity in the world. When God established the Covenant with the people of Israel, it was a radical invitation to release the people from exploitation, and to create a community of faith and a culture that did not establish a domination system in government or religion. In fact, there were laws set up as part of the covenant to ensure that the peasants were protected. The people of ancient Israel were not allowed to serve other gods because it led to financial hardships. They had a Sabbath day so that workers would have the right to rest. The land allotted to each family was inalienable and could not be permanently sold or taken away (Lev. 25:23). A tithe was to be given every third year to be stored in the villages as a supply of surplus food for the resident aliens, orphans, widows and the Levites. There was a strong prohibition of interest (Deut. 23:19. Lev. 25:35-37). Forgiveness of debt was to be a regular practice in the community. The year of Jubilee was a year of release from all bondage.

Jesus' teachings and call were based on a vision of the renewal of the old covenant. This was what he meant by his vision of the kingdom of God. So when the rich man comes and asks Jesus what he needed to do to be part of this kingdom (in this life and in the life to come), it was clear that this man could not be part of two systems. If he was to embrace the way of Jesus, he would have had to let go of his participation in the system that opposed the kingdom of God.

Our human economic and social systems are often based on a vision of scarcity and a sense that we are separate from each other. This means that we often forget that the well-being of one depends on the well being of all. And so we suffer. We live our lives focusing on the things that can never satisfy. Just like the young man had to be reminded of God's vision of abundance, we are being reminded today that our money story does not have to end with misery, isolation, guilt, scarcity, greed, anxiety, or fear.

This may seem daunting for us at this point. The contrast between God's vision and our current realities is so stark. Yet, the transformation of our money story into God's story begins with small steps and small communities like ours changing the ways we deal with money. I love that two couples (Tami and Francis Fuest and Lauren and Jake Ceglia) from our church have shared their money stories with us about their transformation from being in debt to being debt free. They released their old ideas about money and consumption to focusing on having enough. They followed the baby steps which Dave Ramsey offers as financial guidance. They became creative about their money habits: finding creative ways to have fun without consuming and spending money, borrowing items they need instead of shopping, and consuming less and giving more. And the results are beautiful. They are living with a sense of great abundance and peace. They are participating in the kingdom of God right now.

No matter where you are on the spectrum of wealth, the invitation is the same for you: Release whatever is holding you back from living in the kingdom of God right now. Ask God to help you align your life with the values of the kingdom of God. By releasing the things that induce anxiety, guilt, fear, and greed, you will live knowing that you are a citizen of the kingdom of God right now and in the life to come.

Prayer: Palms Down and Palms Up

Center yourself and breathe deeply. Let God bring to your awareness the things you release or pray to release the elements of your money story that prevent you from living fully into God's story: Shame, anxiety, guilt, greed, and fear.

Palms up: Help us to receive your gifts of life, peace, gentleness, and abundance.

Prayer (for A Sanctified Art):

Gracious God, we admit to holding tight to that which we know and understand. We put you in a box to avoid the shades of gray that come with faith. We put ourselves in boxes labeled with expectations and societal norms. We put others in boxes labeled "worthy" and "unworthy." We put all that we have in a box and pray we won't run out. So in this moment, we confess to holding tight to fear, greed, and worldly structures. Forgive us for missing the point. Open our eyes to a new way - to a holiness found in open boxes, unclenched fists, shades of gray, and holy release. Gratefully we pray, Amen.