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Acts 4:32-35

MONEY TALKS

It's Stewardship Sunday so that means I'm supposed to talk about money. The trouble is, I don't really like talking about money. A great many of us were raised to believe that talking about money is not polite. But apparently nobody told that to all those people who wrote the Bible because the Bible talks about money *a lot*. In fact, money is the most discussed social topic in the Bible. One would think based on all the attention Christians sometimes give to talking about sexual immorality that sex is the greatest moral issue of the Bible. But based upon the sheer volume of writings, the moral issue that garners the greatest focus in the Bible is economics. In the Old Testament, the Israelites were instructed over and over again by God to practice economic justice and compassion to the poor and disadvantaged in their midst, and to recall that they themselves had once been enslaved peoples, whose forced labors propped up an unjust empire.

Later, the biblical prophets railed against the people for their failures to practice economic justice. The prophets repeatedly drew the people's attention to the exploitation of the poor, the neglect of widows and orphans, and the greed of the rich and called the people to repent. When the Babylonian army conquered Israel and destroyed the Temple in Jerusalem and forced many of the people to live in exile, some of the prophets interpreted this tragedy as divine judgment for the people's economic immorality. They had not used their money justly to care for the weakest members of society.

When we get to the New Testament, people still keep talking about money—specifically Jesus. Jesus talks about money *a lot!* And what Jesus has to say about money was rather shocking to people in his society. When Jesus lived, it was commonly believed that having wealth was a sign of God’s blessing and approval. But Jesus turns that idea on its head. Instead, Jesus regards wealth as a grave danger. Jesus gives that shocking warning to his followers that it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of heaven (Matt 19:24).

Do you recall the story of when Jesus enters the Temple in Jerusalem and overturns the tables of the money changers? Jesus called the money changers “robbers” indicating that some kind of theft was taking place right there on the Temple grounds. The people who were being robbed were the poor who were forced to pay the many taxes imposed by both the Temple authorities and the Roman taxes that the Temple authorities administered. Many of the rural poor who lived as subsistence farmers were forced to sell off their ancestral lands in order to pay the required taxes, and as a result became landless and destitute. It was economic injustice that angered Jesus.

Jesus even brings economic issues into the most famous Christian prayer of all, the one Jesus taught his followers and which is prayed by Christians all over the globe: The Lord’s Prayer. Each Sunday we pray, “forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors.”

We heard Jesus’ warnings about the hold money has on us in our reading today from Matthew’s gospel. He cautions his followers not to store up treasures on earth, noting that whatever we regard as our treasures will control our hearts. And then Jesus warns us of the impact money can have on our relationship with God because money can become competing master of our hearts and lives. Jesus states that “You cannot serve both God and money.”

Jesus understood that money is a spiritual matter. It claims our hearts and lives. It reveals our priorities and affects our human relationships. It impacts our devotion to God. Jesus talked about money because money is a spiritual matter.

The earliest Christians understood this. The story we read today from the Book of Acts takes place not long after Jesus' Resurrection. It is a time when the early followers of Jesus are still trying to figure out this whole thing called the Church, and what the community of believers will look like. And this is what we are told in the Book of Acts: "The whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common. With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold. They laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need."

I don't know whether this will shock you or not, but it seems pretty clear from this passage that the first Christians embraced socialism. To be sure, the early Church's attempts at socialism don't seem to have lasted very long. The legacy of divesting oneself of property and sharing everything with one another has not been a core practice of Christianity handed down to us through the centuries. So at some point, Christians reverted back to owning personal property. But even though this practice did not continue forever, there is something extraordinary about what it reveals about the first Christians. What it reveals is that in response to the Resurrection of Jesus, the first impulse of these early Christians was economic in nature. The first way these Christians sought to reflect a resurrected life, a transformed life in Christ, was by radically altering how they lived economically. In other words, the Resurrection changed

how they used their money. The Resurrection happened and then as a manifestation of the Resurrection, these first Christians immediately set about changing their relationship to money. They sought to use their money in ways that fostered community, in ways that promoted compassion, in ways that reflected justice. These Christians understood the connection between their spiritual life—as people of the Resurrection—and their use of money.

Money talks. Money always has a story to tell. Money tells stories about our values. Money tells stories about what we treasure. Money tells stories about what people we think matter and what people we think don't matter. Money tells stories about the size of our hearts. And as Christians, as those who follow Jesus, money also tells the story of how the Resurrection has shaped us or changed us. It becomes a sign to the world of the new life made possible in Christ. Money always has a story to tell. What kind of story is it telling about you and me?