



“The Money Conundrum”

Text: Luke 12:1-3, 13-23

*a sermon by the Rev. Dr. Bill Enright
Director Emeritus, Lake Institute on Faith and Giving at IUPUI*

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Today I want to talk with you about one of Jesus’s favorite subjects, money. I want to talk with you about money because it’s my sense that we’re not very good when it comes to talking about money in the church. We mention the subject only when we need it, usually about this time of year when we engage in our stewardship/fundraising effort. Ironically, while Jesus talked a lot about money, he had little to say fundraising. Why then did money matter to Jesus?

In our Gospel lesson Luke gives us a clue. As Luke tells his Jesus-story he is looking back some sixty years. Christianity is becoming a presence in the Roman Empire. The audience Luke addresses is urbane, more worldly savvy and culturally diverse and they are curious: Who are these people who call themselves Christians? What makes them tick? What’s unique in the way they look at life? In the ancient Roman world it was Christianity with its focus on **almsgiving - caring for the poor and needy** - that changed the face of philanthropy in the Greco Roman world. It was people of faith who turned acts of mercy and care into a public virtue. (Peter Brown, *Poverty and Leadership in the Later Roman Empire*)

Luke’s Jesus understands the money conundrum; money is a puzzle, a challenging reality with which we all live be we rich or poor. And now, comes Covid-19 leaving all of us talking/fretting over money with increasing angst. Will we have a job? Will we have enough to see us through retirement? Will we be able to make our mortgage payments, pay our children’s college expenses?

As Jesus sees it, you and I can’t talk realistically about life without talking about money. Neither can we talk about money without talking about what it means to live life well, with purpose and fulfillment. How then do we as Christians handle money? As one of my conversation partners once put it: “*In a money economy if the church has nothing to say about money, it probably has little of importance to say to the world.*”

As Luke sets the stage for our story a large crowd has gathered to hear Jesus. Jesus is talking about the importance of telling the truth, of being honest and transparent. In the audience are people for whom religion is but a pious coverup for bad behavior. Jesus even has a name for such people, he calls them hypocrites or religious play-actors. (12:1) Jesus then reminds his disciples that *“What they do and say in the dark will be heard in the light and what they whisper behind closed doors will be proclaimed from the housetop.”* So, Jesus says *“Don’t be intimidated by bully talk. Remember, ultimately everyone is accountable to God.”*

In the audience is a man with a bone to pick because he’s been left out of the economy. He’s hurting, angry, he finds life unfair. His father has died, his conniving big brother is trying to defraud him of his part of the family inheritance. He listens to Jesus talk about telling the truth and the scam of onerous backroom deal-making. Suddenly the simmering resentment sitting deep in his soul goes public. Unable to muzzle his emotions he blurts out loud: *“Jesus, if what you say is true then tell my brother to share the family inheritance with me. I want what is mine!”* You can almost taste the silence as it slithers the crowd.

The money conundrum. How do we acquire it? How do we manage it? How do we spend it? Why do some have it and others don’t? Money! We can’t live without it but we struggle as to how to live with it.

Note the deftness with which Jesus shifts the conversation and cuts to the bottom line. Refusing to play the role of mediator, he focuses on the insatiable human desire to have just a little bit more. Jesus says: *“Life is not defined by what you have, even when you have a lot.”* (12:16) Then, with a twinkle in his eye, Jesus does what he often did when confronted with a prickly question, he tells a story.

Once upon a time there was an old farmer who at harvest season was blessed with a bumper crop. It happened at a time when corn and soybean prices are at an all-time high. The farmer begins to ponder and dream as to what he might do with his *“more than enough.”*

Ah, he says to himself: *“I know what I will do, I will tear down my barns and build bigger ones. I’ll make new investments, diversify my holdings so I can live a happy care-free life forever.”* And that is when it happens. Plump in the middle of his conniving God pops up with what is the punch line of the story. God simply says: *“Fool! What will happen to all this money when you die, who will get it?”* Jesus then concludes: *“And that is how it is with those who store up treasures for themselves, living only for themselves.”*

Why does Jesus describe the farmer as *“fool!”* Not *fool* because he’s a bad person. Not *fool* because he is doing something wrong with his money in his desire to secure for himself a comfortable retirement. Jesus calls him *fool* because he has confused the *means* of life with the *ends* of life. Money has become the endgame for which he lives.

Fools confuse money with security, stuff with success, assets with self-worth, abundance with health. *Fools* fall for the big lie believing money to be the key to happiness, health and the well-lived life. The cunning of the money conundrum.

In a short story entitled *The Wallet* John Updike tells about a retired stockbroker named **Fulham**. Fulham is a man blessed with more than enough. Retired, he settles into a routine schedule. Every morning he patters upstairs to his office with the *Wall Street Journal* in one hand and a cup of decaffeinated coffee in the other to manage his investments. One day his world turns topsy-turvy; he can't find his wallet. He looks everywhere: under chairs, beds. He goes to the closet and rummages through pockets of suits he has not worn in months. At breakfast he announces to his wife that overnight someone slipped into their house and stole his wallet. His wife, taken aback by the rawness of his emotions replies: "*Fulham, I've never seen you like this, you're acting crazy, wild!*" "Wild" he cries, "*but it's my wallet... without my wallet I am nothing!*"

Last year I discovered that there is a Fulham living in me. It was Saturday night. My youngest granddaughter was with us and we had taken her to the movies. Returning home, I went into my study to read and watch the evening news. I was getting ready for bed when it happened. I reached into my pocket to put my wallet on the dresser and it wasn't there. I returned to my study and turned my easy chair upside down. I searched my car: No wallet. I went crazy. My wallet had a little cash, but it also held my credit cards and my driver's license. My wallet held my identity. It was past midnight when I drove to the movie theatre, my heart racing, my blood pressure off the charts. I was breathing heavily, my shoulders were aching. I thought I was having a heart attack and come morning I ended up in the hospital ER. No, I was not having a heart attack, just a reality-sobering panic attack. The pinch of the money conundrum; how it catches us at life's turnings.

In his recent book *For the Life of the World*, Yale theologian Miroslav Volf observes that modern culture is very clear as to what we must do if we are to have a good life; we must focus on the means, the path, to the good life. So, we invest our time and energy in securing the resources that we think make for the good life. A degree from the right school for our children, and I think of the recent college admissions scandal! A home in the right neighborhood, and I recall the Great Recession with many family homes ending up under water! A job that carries prestige and makes more money, and I think of the people I talk with who have money but no job satisfaction. Now, along comes the Covid virus putting all of us at risk, reminding us that we all are vulnerable to disease and death. Volf writes: "*When the means for life become the ends for which we live, we become like a dog chasing its tail. Around and around and around we go in endless circles.*" as a gnawing emptiness slowly shrivels our souls. (pp. 26-27)

Jesus was on to something when he said: *Things/possessions/money, do not give life.* When the means becomes the end, life loses its balance and we lose our way.

That old Presbyterian patriarch John Calvin used an apt phrase in describing the money conundrum: he called it a *slippery slope*. A slope tilting on the one end toward suffocating poverty and on the other end toward self-indulgent consumerism. The trick, Calvin says, is learning how to navigate this slop. He writes: "*use God's gifts for that end to which they were created, for our good, not for our ruin...Not only to provide us with the necessities of life but also to bless us with delight and good cheer.*" (*Institutes of the Christian Religion*: 3/10/1-2)

What then is the end for which we live? The old Presbyterian catechism answers that question this way: *“The chief end for which we live as Christians is to glorify God and enjoy God for ever.* What does that mean? To glorify God is to use the good gifts of creation in such a way as to put a smile on God’s face. To enjoy God is to use the gifts with which we have been blessed in such a way that they put the smile of gratitude on our face.

This week Eli Lilly and Company announced that they had entered into an agreement with the Gates Foundation to supply antibody treatments for COVID-19 to low and middle-income countries. What caught my eye in that announcement was the fact that all the collaborators were waiving their royalties for the antibodies being distributed to the poor countries.

The key to the well lived life is to **pay attention!** In particular, pay attention in this moment of pandemic disruption that leaves us without a playbook to guide us. Pay attention to what God is about in the world. Individually in this moment of unrest and distrust pay attention to what God might be calling you to do in birthing hope, building peace with justice, in giving grace and living graciously. As a church, pay attention, listen for what might God might be about in your neighborhood, in the city of Evansville. Where might God be calling you into a new venture or partnership? To glorify and enjoy God is to use our gifts and possessions for the flourishing of others as well as for our own well-being.

In 1996 an 86-year-old cleaning and sewing woman living in Hattiesburg, Mississippi made the front page of the New York Times. Her name was **Osceola McCarty**, her picture showed her sitting at her table her Bible open to 1 Corinthians 13: *Love is generous, love is kind.* She was headline news because of a six-figure gift she made to the University of Southern Mississippi.

Where/how did this domestic get that kind of money? Every month, from the time she left school in the 6th grade to support her family, she put something away in a deposit account at the local bank. One day, her banker knowing that Osceola was up in years called to ask her if she knew how much money she had and inquired as to what she wanted to do with that money; it was over \$250,000.

When Osceola came to meet with the banker, he realized that she had no idea as to the value of her savings account. To help her get her mind around the situation the banker took ten dimes and placed them in a row on his desk. He then asked Ms. McCarty how she might want to spend the dimes. She said, *“I’d like to give three to my church, two to my family and five to the school down the street from where I live.”* *“You know”*, she continued, *“those people have been so good to me. Even though I could never have attended that school when I was a girl because I was black, they brought me their clothes to wash and mend. So, I’d like to do something that would help black girls like myself go to that school.”* The banker replied, *“That’s so thoughtful and generous; but, don’t you want to keep some of this money for yourself, give yourself a present or two, take a trip?”* *“Oh no,”* she replied. *“I’m happy with what I have; you know, in life there is a difference between wants and needs. I don’t need any more than I have.”*

It would be presumptuous for me to tell you how to live with your money. So, I leave you with two take-home questions to ponder. First, are you using what has been given you to put a smile on God’s face? Second, does what you have leave you fretting or grateful?