

Deuteronomy 15:1-11 ~ Matthew 19:16-22

Our Money Story: Releaseⁱ

2nd of 4 Sermon Stewardship Series

21st Sunday after Pentecost ~ Reformation Sunday ~ October 30, 2022

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Introduction to Second Lesson:

Why the command to, "Open your hand to the poor and needy in your land? And the command, "to forgive all debts every seventh year" that we heard in our first scripture lesson from Deuteronomy 15? It comes in verse 15: "*Remember* that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God redeemed you; for this reason, I lay this command upon you today." So yes, it is when we remember who and whose we are (our theme last week) that we can hope to experience holy release. In the light of our identity as God's beloved, redeemed children, we can go from this (*gesture two guarded tight-fists*) to this (*open hands, unguarded*). Or can we? Let's be honest: it's easier said than done. We have a story about that. It's found in Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Today, we will listen to Matthew's telling. In Matthew 19:16-22, his certain "someone" is young, a twenty-something, and wealthy.

Sermon

"Perfect!" Have you noticed how the word "perfect" has crept into our everyday conversation? A server comes to your table to take your breakfast order and asks, "What would you like?" You answer, "I'll have coffee, two eggs over easy, bacon, and toast." The server responds, "Perfect!" I use the word that way, too. When I am trying to set up a meeting here at church and we find a time and day that works for everyone involved, I will write exuberantly, "Perfect!" in my "reply all." The word "perfect" typically applies when we answer every problem on a math test correctly, we get an A+ perfect score. Zero mistakes. Nailed it!

Those of us who are old enough to remember back to 1976, may recall that was the year of the summer Olympics when Nadia Comaneci was the first every to achieve a perfect score in gymnastics. More recently Simone Biles has earned not one, but seven perfect "10's." Stunning and thrilling, but *not* what Jesus was talking about. Neither ordering a meal, organizing a meeting, nor competing for perfect 10's on the balance beam, was what Jesus meant when he said to the wealthy young man, "If you wish to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give the money to the poor, then come, follow me."

In our walk with Christ, a "perfect 10" sin-free life is not a thing. Jesus was not commanding this young man, or us, to work toward an error-free life in order to earn our way into heaven. Honestly, we all miss the mark every day, no matter how hard we try. Nor is eternal life something we earn. In Jesus' time and tradition, the question the young man asked, "What good deed must I do to inherit eternal life?" was *illegitimate* according to Jewish New Testament scholar, Amy Jill Levine. The young man was already "in." Eternal life was part of being in the covenant of Israel. Following the commandments was expected in response to this precious gift. Part of what throws us off is the Greek word, *teleios*, translated in English as "perfect." The Greek word *teleios* does not mean "without defect, sinless." It means wholeness, or undivided devotion.

The Hebrew word, Shalom, is rendered in the Greek as *teleios*. Jesus was saying to that young man that day, and Jesus is saying to us today: "If you wish to be whole, if you wish to walk in the way of peace, harmony, wholeness, completeness made known to us in Christ, then go, sell, give to the poor, and then come, follow me."

If Jesus had told him to just crank up what he was already doing another notch or two, he might have done it. And not gone away grieving. What this young man could not do, judging by his response, was give up the privilege, the status, and the economic power that his wealth meant to him. He did not want to let go of his identity as a wealthy man. That was what he could not release. Being wealthy meant more to him than following Christ. At least that's how things lined up for him at that moment. I like to think that perhaps with more time, and thought and prayer, that this young man, did change his mind and heart. We don't know the end of his story.

What we do know is this: Money can really mess us up. Let's be honest. Money can really mess us up as individuals, as a church body, and yes, as the body politic we call the USA. In 2021 sales of state lotteries in the US reached approximately 105.26 billion dollars. The chance, no matter how small, to get rich quick, compels us powerfully. Even just to have a little more, would make all the difference, yes? Perhaps you have heard that most Americans, at nearly every income level long for a 20% increase in their income. "With just 20% more, life would be easy."ⁱⁱ I remember when my husband Bob and I went from the nearly negative income of two full-time graduate students with two small children, to graduating, getting jobs and all of a sudden anticipating two full-time professor and minister incomes. Relatively speaking, that was a big jump, more than 20%. We thought we would feel so flush, so liberated. More money than we'd ever had or know what to do with... That feeling did not last long.

Money can really mess us up. God knows this. And so did Jesus. From the very beginning of our faith story, God set guardrails in the form of commandments, some of which we heard in our first scripture lesson. Laws to keep us on the path of loving and caring for our neighbors. Laws to remind us who and whose we are. Laws to reset and return us to the care of all, especially the needy and the vulnerable. Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann has called it "an economy of neighborliness." He has come to see in his later years that the entire Old Testament, is a collection of books about economics, asking the question, "How do we organize the economy to act out the deep truth of neighborliness?"ⁱⁱⁱ We will think more about this question and imagine what a neighborly economy and society might look like in two weeks, when our theme is "Reimagine."

Today is Reformation Sunday—an appropriate day to consider how money can really mess us up as a church, too. Did you ever wonder what pushed German priest and hymn writer Martin Luther over the edge to act against the church that he deeply loved? If Martin Luther lived in 2022, surely, he would have posted his 95 Theses on TikTok, Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook. Since the year was 1517, he released his argument with the church on a paper that he famously nailed to the door of his church in Wittenberg, Germany. He titled them, "Disputation

on the Power and Efficacy of Indulgences.” Today, October 30, 2022, is Reformation Sunday, because Luther took this bold action on October 31, 1517. Yes, on Halloween, which back then (and now) was All Hallows Eve. The day before All Saints Day. I believe Martin Luther’s remembering the saints and the original gospel mandate of what it means to be church just might have spurred him to throw his caution to the wind and take an action that would ultimately lead to the Protestant Reformation.

Here’s the piece of this story that I learned only recently. And it drills right down into our money story as a church. What cracked things open for Martin Luther and pushed him to take action was a fundraising effort. Although the selling of indulgences by the church had been going on for over 400 years, in 1517 the Catholic Church launched a huge capital campaign to raise money to build St. Peter’s Basilica at the Vatican in Rome. Preachers were dispatched all over Europe to preach repentance and sell indulgences for the building fund. Why were they such a hot item? Indulgences were a piece of paper that one could buy to be released from prior sins and reduce one’s time in purgatory. Basically, for a price you could get into heaven faster. The more money spent on the indulgence, the quicker the trip to heaven according to official church doctrine. Yes, clearly the church had devolved to the point of monetizing salvation. The church that had originally focused on care for the poor, had flipped over to prioritize self-preoccupation. As Dr. Tom Long, Professor of Preaching and author put it, “The sheer vulgarity of it forced Luther not only to question the place of indulgences but to rethink the practice of repentance more deeply.”^{iv} For Martin Luther’s ability to *remember* and to *release*: we can be thankful.

What gets in your way of following Christ? The answer is different for each of us. And varies within us, from day to day. Whatever possessions you grip most tightly: they are the junk that is most in your way. Whatever attribute you cling to above all others, that is the little “g” god, that is dividing your heart and diluting your soul strength. Here are a few examples: Like aiming for perfection, rather than wholeness. Or seeing your political adversaries as evil. Or succumbing to the divisive spirit sweeping our land, within families, schools, communities.

What is gripping your life and keeping you awake at night? The only wealth and security we can truly have is Christ. Here’s the good news: If you wish to really experience shalom, you can. Christ is calling you and me to release our grip on all that other stuff, so that we can grow into the person, the church, the community that God yearns for us to become. I will close with a prayer written by Ted Loder to help us do that. It is titled, “Release Me.”

*O Holy and Haunting Presence
whose spirit moves quietly
but surely
in the sound and fury of the world
and of my life,
you know me
as rushing water knows the rock
and releases its beauty
to reflect new light.*

Open me

*to the insistent abrasiveness of your grace,
for I often trivialize love
by abandoning the struggles
which accompany its joys
and rejecting the changes
which lead to its fulfillments.*

Release me

*from the dark fury
of assuming I am unloved
when the day calls for sacrifice
and the night for courage.*

Release me

*from the ominous fear
of thinking some sin
or failure of mine
can separate me from you
when life demands hard choices,
and the battle, high risks.*

Release me

*from the dangerous illusions
of independence
when the human family summons me
to the realities and promises
of interdependence
among races, sexes, nations.*

Release me

*from being possessed
by riches I do not need
and grievances that weary me
when you call me to share
my very self
with neighbors
and to reflect for the world
the light of the kingdom
within me.^v*

ⁱ "Our Money Story" stewardship theme was created by A Sanctified Art LLC, sanctifiedart.org.

ⁱⁱ Andrew Warner, "Material Things," *The Word, Christian Century*, October 3, 2006, p. 19.

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://pajaronian.com/an-economy-of-neighborliness>

^{iv} Thomas Long, "You Shall Know the Truth: The Challenge of Repentance," *Journal for Preachers*, Lent 2022.

^v Ted Loder, "Release Me," *Guerillas of Grace: Prayers for the Battle*, (LuraMedia: San Diego, CA, 1984), pp.50-51.