

Your Money or Your Life¹

Rev. Cossy Ksander

Jack Benny was a radio and TV comedian from the 1920s to 1970s whose persona featured a flamboyant stinginess. In an oft repeated gag, a robber would point a gun at him, demanding “your money or your life”. Then Jack would engage in a very long pause. “Well?” says the robber. “I’m thinking, I’m thinking,” says Jack.

Your money or your life. It’s the point of Jesus’ parable of the rich fool in Luke 12:16 - 21. The rich man is a fool, because he focuses on his possessions, as if he had control over how long he would have them. Foolishly, he chooses money instead of life. His internal conversation focuses on his stuff; he does not notice any family or community that might have need to some of it; he does not inquire where all this abundance came from or what might be his grateful response to it; he does not ask God what might be his next helpful or reasonable step. In self-absorbed isolation, he focuses on storing, protecting, managing his stuff. This man evidently believes that his wealth gives him security, control, pleasure. Then death comes in and puts a stop to all his delusions. God calls him a fool. And Jesus warns, “Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of possessions” (Luke 12:13).

Whether or not you’re squirming, I sure am. This is not one of those comforting texts where Jesus loves and forgives me as often as necessary. It’s true that Jesus loves and forgives constantly, but only in the context of reality, not in the context of my fairytale, dream world. It is reality that I cannot take it with me; it is reality that naked I came into the world and naked I

will leave; it is reality that life does not rest upon wealth. And not even God will change reality so that I can equally trust my bank balance and my God, so that I can die at some convenient moment when I have distributed my stuff wisely and well.

Perhaps, money is the last, dirty secret in our society. We've learned to talk about death, at least in the tidy, abstract stages of Elizabeth Kubler-Ross. We've learned to talk about sex--perhaps too much--but we do not talk about money. We do not speak of our annual income with even our best friends. We do not share the burden of filling out tax forms by throwing parties and doing the work together. We do not express our fear or insecurity or greed to anyone.

James P. Wind of the Alban Institute notes, "Although dealing with money consumes a great deal of our time and energy, we all try to get through life talking about [it] as little as possible--both at home and at church....Money talk cuts too close to the bone; it exposes our limits and reveals our priorities and true values too quickly. It creates conflict and stress. So we talk only when we must, and then we are very careful."²

And Ministry of Money, an organization that assists people in addressing their money issues, chimes in: "In our society, money represents power, pleasure, security and status. But money also brings fear, guilt, insecurity, greed and selfishness. We've all been haunted by most of these feelings. Money is a paradox--it enslaves, yet it also frees; it is intensely private, but it is very public; it measures worth, yet it is no measure of real worth; it destroys but also creates...As Christians, we need and want to make sense of the puzzle of money in our lives and move into the freedom, delight and peace of a right relationship to it."³

Money feeds our illusions of control, power, security. Like the rich fool, I want to believe that I will always be healthy, I will never die, I will not live lonely. Money will take care of me. Such stinking thinking is a powerful, familiar daydream, but it's not true.

Money is the second most addressed topic in the New Testament (the first being the nature of God's realm). Money pops up everywhere. Paul reports that God loves a cheerful giver. Timothy is warned of the dangers of wealth. Luke describes the communal nature of the earliest church, which "had all things in common" and distributed wealth "to all, as any had need" (Acts 2:44f).

Jesus tells many parables that refer to money. In addition to the Rich Fool, there's the Pearl of Great Price, the Treasure Hidden in a Field, the Workers in the Vineyard, the Dishonest Manager, the Talents, the Unmerciful Servant, the Rich Man & Lazarus, and the three parallel stories of God as shepherd, housewife, and father recovering lost treasure.

And then there are Jesus' bold pronouncements concerning money. The disciples are not to take any money with them on their missionary journey, but rather live off the kindness of strangers. Wealthy people will have to struggle harder than a camel getting through a needle's eye to enter God's realm. A poor widow who gives all of her tiny wealth is praiseworthy far above the rich who give a small percentage of their available surplus. And in an outpouring of joy, Jesus orders, "Give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap" (Luke 6:38.)

Money is not just some incidental or accidental topic in the New Testament. It is a theme that weaves through many passages. It is unavoidable to understanding and responding to the good news.

There is biblical principle summarized by Jesus in John 8:32, “the truth will make you free.” It says that I cannot be transformed, saved, changed if I do not admit the shape of reality. I have to know and tell the truth, before I can be set free. I have to face up to the truth about my own lostness, helplessness, evil. Then, God can take over and rescue me from it. My truth-telling frees me from trying to keep fixing my attitudes toward money on my own. And lets God in to do some holy meddling.

God has been meddling with some friends of mine. One friend sometimes places a \$20 bill in a coat destined for “the needy.” Having no idea who may receive this secret gift, she likes to imagine their possible joy and amazement when they find it. She gives with exuberant grace. She gives with God-like grace, good measure, running over. Another friend keeps one pocket ready with cash uncounted and, when approached for money on the street, he pulls some out without looking, and hands it over. He gives with exuberant grace, good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over.

Asked why they act so, these people can only answer, “It feels really good to give in this way, quietly, without counting the cost.”

Such generosity appears closely connected to salvation. It works like this: When I recognize that God has rescued me from a meaningless life, then generosity comes easily, and giving is a pleasant activity. I give, because I recognize gratefully how much I have received.

On the other hand, when I am living far from God, alienated and hopeless, then any giving -- even for the promised pledge or the necessary bill -- is difficult, filled with reluctance and resentment. The God-emptied world displays only scarcity, insecurity, fear, and shame. The God-filled world shimmers with abundance, promise, safety, and joy.

John D. Rockefeller was once asked how much money was enough for him. He reportedly replied, “Just a little bit more.”⁴ His answer demonstrated that familiar attitude of scarcity, never satisfied, never grateful.

At a hospice in Port-au-Prince, Haiti a man was dying. But he was willing to talk to my friend, a struggling musician and campus pastor. After a time the conversation turned to economics, and my friend said, “Do you consider me to be rich?” The man studied him for a while, and then asked in return, “Do you eat every day?” There was more silence, and then the man concluded, “If you eat every day, then you are rich.”⁵

One of the conditions of human life is that we have free will. We get to choose our attitudes, and they in turn strongly influence our actions. Abundance or scarcity. Glass half-full or half-empty. Blessing or curse. Life or death. Choose.

Death is the inevitable boundary of human life. In the parable, God says, “This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?” (Luke 12:20) This very night, God requires an accounting of the life lived, not of the wealth amassed. God seems singularly uninterested in the things. It’s the life – the sense of priorities, the connections to God and to other people, the growth in spiritual gifts. These are the things God wants to hear about. As Jesus concludes, were we “rich toward God” or not?

In our wrestling with money issues, we can make use of the fact that we each owe a death to the universe. We can use our God-given imaginations to project our future understanding onto our present decisions concerning money. Ignatius of Loyola taught this discernment technique. He said, when you need to make a decision, imagine that you are on your deathbed and then ask, “Do I feel glad that I made this decision or do I regret it?”⁶ When I die, will I be glad that I

purchased that cell phone or will I regret it? That summer cottage, that tee-shirt, that SUV, that sugar cone. The internal comfort or discomfort that I feel when I answer such questions will give me important clues about my wisest decision in the present circumstance.

Despite scriptural warnings we go on building our bigger barns: the average size of an American home increased from 983 to 2349 square feet between 1950 and 2004.⁷ They claim that whoever dies with the most stuff wins. But Jesus offers an alternative voice, asking what does it profit you to gain the whole world and forfeit your life. And which voice will we choose?

¹ Adapted from a sermon preached August 4, 2007 at Community Presbyterian Church, North Riverside, Illinois.

² James P. Wind, "Dear Member," *inside information: A Special Update for Members of The Alban Institute*, Summer 1998, p. 1.

³ Ministry of Money (Gaithersburg, MD). Discipleship Compassion Stewardship, undated. (Brochure.)

⁴ Clearly apocryphal, this story is also told of Andrew Carnegie, J. Paul Getty, J.P. Morgan and Nelson Rockefeller.

⁵ Interview with the Rev. Bryan Sirchio, Campus Minister, University of Wisconsin (Madison), Port au Prince, Haiti, 3 January 1998.

⁶ George E. Ganss, S.J., ed., *Ignatius of Loyola: The Spiritual Exercises and Selected Works*, The Classics of Western Spirituality, (New York: Paulist Press, 1991), p. 165, section 186.

⁷ Margot Adler, "Behind the Ever-Expanding American Dream House," *All Things Considered*, 4 July 2006, <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=5525283> (27 May 2008).

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