

Spending Spree,

30 July 2006

Bible passage: **Mark 10: 21-23** (*The Message*)

Jesus looked him hard in the eye—and loved him! He said, “There’s one thing left: Go sell whatever you own and give it to the poor. All your wealth will then be heavenly wealth. And come follow me.”

The man’s face clouded over. This was the last thing he expected to hear, and he walked off with a heavy heart. He was holding on tight to a lot of things, and not about to let go.

Sermon nugget: The way we view and use our financial resources says a lot about what we value in life. How can we learn to be more generous?

It’s hard to believe that school will be starting very soon, and I suspect that there are some parents here who aren’t quite ready for the outlay of money it will take to get the kids equipped for the first day of school. It’s amazing to me what it costs these days to buy all the required school supplies and books, and that doesn’t even begin to include feeding the students, or clothing them or putting shoes on them! Going to school is an expensive proposition!

Some of you may remember that last year about this time, we tried to help out those families who couldn’t provide for their kids school supplies by working with an IPS project called the “Backpack Attack.” Well, this year, we have a similar opportunity to help by providing backpacks and school supplies for students at IPS School 20. On the back of your Garden to go, you’ll find a list of the needed supplies. I hope you’ll choose to help out, and bring the backpacks filled either here or Oak Hill, or to The Garden office at St. Luke’s by August 13th.

Thinking about the beginning of school caused me to remember something my Mom and I did every summer when I was growing up...at least the years that I was old enough to appreciate the experience. We used to make a trip to Louisville to shop for school clothes. I had worked at this or that for about as long as I can remember, and I always had a little stash set aside to buy myself something special, and Mom was always an easy mark if I found something I didn’t have enough money for. That was our once-a-year spending spree, but as I recall, whatever we bought was it for the year...except maybe for birthdays or Christmas.

I don’t recall feeling deprived of anything, but as I look back, I realize that we really didn’t have all that much money, and my parents were really careful with what they did have. Both my Mom and Dad worked outside the home, and a lot of that was to earn enough money so I could go to college. I suspect that they were pretty stressed trying to figure out how they were going to afford everything it took to raise a child, and that was years ago!

So often, it seems to come down to money. We can’t live with it, and can’t live without it. Money, no matter how much or how little we have, seems to be a source of stress and anxiety for many of us. Only the very wealthy, I’m guessing, have the

luxury of not worrying about having enough, but I wonder if even they stress about it sometimes.

Anne Lamott is a writer that I’ve mentioned before. I read an article she wrote about money and its place in her life. She described herself as someone who has been both rich and poor, and said that she’s uncomfortable either way. In an attempt to show the kind of power money can have over us, and how hard it was for her to get a handle on this whole money thing, she said, “Sometimes I feel like I’m trying to put an octopus to bed. As soon as you think you have those other arms tucked in nicely under the sheets, the money arm pops out from under the blankets and flails around.”

I would guess that part of the dilemma we all experience when it comes to money is the society in which we live. We live in a country where the rich are getting richer, and the poor are getting poorer. And we’re seduced to spend what we have, sometimes not too wisely. The United States has the widest selection of products for us to purchase, and marketers spend a lot of time and energy trying to talk us into buying the latest thing. It’s pretty easy for some of us to get lured onto the Internet or into a store, convinced that we absolutely *have* to have a certain product for our life to be complete.

The problem is that acquiring the item we’ve lusted after doesn’t usually do it. All too often, we’re just deeper in debt, and unhappy with ourselves. And it often comes down to money. Oh, I don’t believe it’s the money itself; money is neither good nor bad. Rather it has to do with the way we think about money, how we choose to use it, and the control it may have over our lives. Therein lies the basic problem.

The reality is that our faith can have something to say about the way in which we utilize the financial resources we have. If we were to count the number of times Jesus talked about money in the stories he told, we would find that 16 of the identifiable stories that he told had to do with money.

Scholars tell us that in the gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, Jesus talked about money 288 times, or 1 out of every ten verses. In the Bible as a whole, there are 500 or so verses on faith, 500 or so verses on prayer, and 2000 verses on money and possessions. What’s clear is that our fascination with money has been a universal issue throughout the ages.

We only have one Bible passage this morning, not 2000, but in the one we have, Jesus is talking about money. Just prior to the part we have, we read that a rich man came to Jesus and asked what he had to do to inherit eternal life. What he was asking may be a question some of us are asking right now. I don’t think the man was as concerned about life after death, as he was about life now. I think he was saying, “Look. I have all these things, and all this money, but I’m still not happy. What do I have to do to find happiness?” I think he wanted to know how he could live life in a way that was more meaningful and significant than what he was experiencing at the moment.

At any rate, he asks his question, and Jesus first says to him that it’s important that he know the Ten Commandments and live by them, and the man quickly responds that he has always done that. It’s then that Jesus sees the real issue, and that’s what our

Bible passage tells us about. It reads: **Jesus looked him hard in the eye—and loved him! He said, “There’s one thing left: Go sell whatever you own and give it to the poor. All your wealth will then be heavenly wealth. And come follow me.”**

The man’s face clouded over. This was the last thing he expected to hear, and he walked off with a heavy heart. He was holding on tight to a lot of things, and not about to let go.

Jesus was, as usual, very perceptive, and he could tell that the man’s wealth was in his way. When the man heard what Jesus had to say, he could only walk away. Money was too much of a force in his life.

Now note that Jesus didn’t condemn him for being rich, or chastise him for not being generous. That wasn’t his way. He just recognized the fact that the young man’s absorption with money was in the way of his relationship with God, with others, and even with life itself. As long as that was where he was focused, he would never live the kind of life he was looking for.

I heard someone say that we only have to look at our checkbooks to see what we value in life. Or, as someone else said, **“Budget is a theological document. It indicates who or what we worship.”** As I said earlier, money in and of itself is not the problem; it’s the value we give to it, the way we use it, and what happens because of it that really matters. Each one of us decides what that value is, and what we’ll do with our money, regardless of how little or how much we have. What we do with our money reflects our values and priorities; it tells what our lives are like.

Take a story about John D. Rockefeller, for instance. He was the world’s first billionaire. I read that for years, he lived on crackers and milk because of stomach troubles caused by worrying about his wealth. He rarely had a good night’s sleep, and guards stood at his door constantly. He was wealthy, but he was miserable! It was only when he began to share his wealth with others that his health improved, and he eventually lived to be a very old man.

We don’t have to be wealthy like Rockefeller to see how money reflects our lives. I know someone who came here from the Philippines twenty or so years ago. She is divorced, and has struggled mightily over the years I’ve known her to keep her head above water and raise her daughters. In the time I’ve known her, she’s gotten by by holding down two jobs, and there are times that she’s had three. Several years ago now, she brought her sister over here, and the sister finally found a job as a seamstress. As you might guess, neither of them makes a whole lot of money, but do you know that both of them regularly send \$100 or more at a time to other family members still living in the Philippines? When I asked my friend how they could afford to do that, she said simply, “They need it more than we do.”

When I heard her answer to my question, I have to tell you that it stopped me in my tracks, and caused me to reflect on where I am with this money thing—both for myself, and for us here at The Garden. My friends, there are tons of folks “out there” who need it more than we do, and I’m convinced that we will only find happiness and meaning in life when we share generously what we have with others.

That’s a large part of the reason that we have chosen to give 10%, what the Bible refers to as a tithe, to those who need it more than we do. Those of you who’ve been around here for a while know that we give 10% of the money that comes in the watering cans on Sunday to a different local charitable organization each month. We had a chance to experience that just this morning.

Thus far this year, we have averaged somewhere around \$2100 dollars a month that we have given away to these groups that are mostly grassroots groups, struggling to make their way as they attempt to help others in our community. You may or may not realize it, but the support we are able to give these groups is sometimes the difference between folks receiving much needed services, or not.

Many of us have been talking about the impact we are able to make and decided we’d really like to do more. We’d like to be more generous in helping those who need it more than we do. The 10% team that researches the organizations you all suggest got together recently, and they decided to come to The Garden’s Leadership Team with a suggestion. Actually, it was more than a suggestion. It was a strong urging that we up the level of our giving to the groups that become our recipients.

I think their idea is just exactly what we need to move toward. What the team proposed is this: that we challenge ourselves to raise our level of giving to be able to provide at least \$3000 a month to each of our 10% recipients.

Let’s think that through a little bit. It means that we, as Gardeners, will have to make a more significant commitment each month, and if we do that, it really becomes a win/win situation. By raising our level of care and commitment just a little bit, we can help others at the same time that we can help The Garden spread the good news of God’s unconditional love for everyone. To me that’s the best of all worlds—helping others and helping The Garden become a stronger, more vital voice of compassion and love that speaks boldly into our community. I feel very positive about it, and plan to do my part, and more as I can.

My Filipino friend was right, you know? Regardless of how pressed we may feel, we are all in all a fortunate lot, and there are those who “need it more than we do.” It’s up to us—each of us, really, to search our hearts, and make a commitment on how we can help make this world a better place, and our lives a little more meaningful. Think about it. OK?

Closing:

In Brian McLaren’s book, *A New Kind of Christian*, a character named Neo was a very generous person with his financial resources. At one point, Neo said that giving was one of his greatest joys in life, and then he continued, **“Generosity is one of the most important spiritual disciplines, and greed is one of the soul’s worst poisons.”**

The longer I live, the more convinced I am that true joy comes from giving, not taking. As we leave here this morning, I hope and pray that each one of us has the opportunity to experience that kind of joy. Have a good Sunday, and go in peace. Amen.