

SR11209

“Let’s Talk About Money”

Mark 12:38-44

“Let’s talk about money.” Those words, or some similar to them were the opening words from my Economics 101 professor at Trinity University. I remember them all of these years later because they were so straight forward. At my house growing up we never talked about money. But that professor did. In that first class we began with the basics about money; its history, its use and its complexity. We talked about how money, whether gold, silver or otherwise allowed modern civilization to develop beyond being a barter economy and each family having to fend for itself. We learned that money today has no value in and of itself. In other words the paper and coinage we have is merely a promissory note. It has no inherent value. Finally and most importantly the professor emphasized that money was merely a medium of exchange. Its only value is what someone is willing to exchange for it. So this morning it would be very easy to stop right there, read the definition of money on the bulletin cover and leave it at that. But if we did so we would be fooling ourselves because as we all know, money is so much more.

Money is security. Money is status. Money is power. Money is security. We know that money is what allows us to be sure that we have a roof over our heads, food in our pantries and electricity to keep the lights on. Money is what offers us security that when we are no longer able to work we will not be on the streets. Money is status. We cannot turn on the television, open a newspaper or listen to the radio and we hear people telling us that we will be seen as superior people if we wear the right clothes, drive the right car and live in the right neighborhood...and all of that takes money. Money is power. Recently on CNN online there was a story in which some Republicans were complaining that large contributors to the President had more access to the White House than other people. Well duhh! So when has that been big news. Money has always showed itself as a route to power and influence. To say that money is merely a medium of exchange misses the deeper power that it holds over us.

Lest you think these further understandings of money are something new, think again. They have been around as long as money has been around and they are at the heart of Jesus story this morning. I realize that at first reading of the portion of the story about the scribes that might not be clear. So let’s do a bit of background. Scribes were religious lawyers. They were supposed to have secular jobs and practice their religious work on the side, as a gift to the people, unlike the priests who were paid for their work in the Temple. Scribes however did not find this a situation that they liked. They wanted to be free from the anxiety of keeping an ordinary job so they ingratiated themselves with the wealthy in order to gain larger and larger salaries. This is what gave the scribes the time to go about in the market place. The money they were paid also allowed the wear long robes which were a sign of their wealthy status. Finally their income allowed them access to power which they used to steal widows houses by bribing

the elders in the gate to side with them. Jesus warns his followers to be careful about the use of money for these purposes because “They will receive the greater condemnation.”

If we were to stop right here, without reading the next story we might have a very biased notion of Jesus’ view of money. It would seem that Jesus has this thing against money. But if we continue reading what we find is a much more positive story about the use of money. We hear of the widow who comes to the Temple, tosses in her pennies and receives Jesus’ affirmation. He affirms her because rather than using money for security, status and power, she offers it to God for the work of the Kingdom. In addition he makes sure that we know that this widow gives all that she has. “She has put in everything she had, her whole living.” So here we have Jesus affirming money as a demonstration of faith and faithfulness. So what then are we to say about Jesus’ views on money? I think we come to grips with the fact that for Jesus money is not the issue, but how we use it. For Jesus, how we use money is a measure of our faith.

I realize that idea, that our use of money is a measure of the intensity of our faith, might seem a bit strange. We often want to define faith as merely intellectual assent to certain beliefs about Jesus and God. Jesus however through his life and teachings defines faith as faithfulness. Faith is expressed as much in actions as in beliefs. And for Jesus one of the surest ways to see the level of our faithfulness is to look at how we use our money. We can see this clearly in the juxtaposition of these two stories. In a sense Mark offers us is a continuum of faithfulness. On the one end are the scribes who use money only for themselves. On the other end of the spectrum is the widow who gives everything to God. I would argue that few if any of us exist at either end of the spectrum. I imagine all of us who know Christ try and give something to the life and work of the church. I also know that since we are here and clothed that we have not given everything away. The question that I think is posed to us then is not whether or not we ought to give everything away, but where ought we to be on the continuum?

I say that because Jesus never expects someone to be poverty stricken in order to give to the church just as Jesus does not expect us to keep everything for ourselves. So where then ought we to be? I think Jesus’ point is that we ought to be wherever our giving causes us to say, “ouch.” Notice carefully in the story of the widow, Jesus compliments her because she was willing to give sacrificially. While he does not condemn those who gave large amounts out of their wealth, he lifts up the widow because she gave to the point where she would say “ouch.” This understanding is at the heart of all that Jesus has been teaching and living. Jesus was moving toward sacrificing his own life. He had trained his disciples to be willing to sacrifice for the kingdom. He spoke of being last and not first. His views on money were simply an extension of his very life and mission. Following Jesus is moving to a life where we are not at the center of everything. We can see this idea in the installation of deacons later this morning. These men and women are offering their time and energy in service to God and neighbor rather than only for themselves. Time, talent and treasure...how we use them all demonstrates the intensity of our faith.

The question then this morning becomes for each of us to decide where we ought to be on the continuum. Where does God want us to be? Where is the “ouch” point? Where is the point

where our faith will be stretched in order to grow? My challenge to you this morning is to prayerfully consider where your touch point is and ask if you would be willing to move closer to that point as you consider what to give to the life and work of God in and through this church?