

“Economics of Faith”
Mark 10:17-31

In his book, *No Box Seats in the Kingdom*, William Carter tells about, “A seminary professor named Stanley Hauerwas has a novel idea about how churches should receive new members. A teacher of Christian ethics at Duke University, he has written about the church’s need for honesty and has called us to tell the truth as a “community of character.” To this end, he has an interesting idea for stewardship. Whenever people join the church, Hauerwas thinks they should stand and answer four questions: Who is your Lord and Savior? The response: “Jesus Christ.” Do you trust in him and seek to be his disciple? “I do.” Will you be a faithful member of this congregation? The answer: “I will.” Finally, one last question: What is your annual income? When people join the church, Dr. Hauerwas thinks they ought to name their Lord and Savior and tell fellow church members how much money they make. It is obvious Hauerwas does not serve as a pastor of a congregation. His idea just wouldn’t work, especially in the American church. Most church members believe salary figures are more sacred than prayer. Most pastors quickly learn how to dance around the issue of money without ever naming it.”

Money and talking about it can be very tough in church, but the problem is that if we are serious about our faith and the Bible, we cannot avoid dealing with the issue of money. In today’s Bible reading from Mark, Jesus deals head on with the issue of money. But even as Jesus deals with this issue as directly as possible, the church over the years has attempted in many ways to tame this story, to make it less impactful. Here are a few of the ways faithful Christians have tried to soften this story. One example comes to us from the ninth-century when an interpreter made up the idea of a low gate into Jerusalem called “the eye of the needle,” through which camels could pass only if stooped and without their stuff. This way the story can be minimized to Jesus criticizing only the proud rich, or only the rich who are not extremely determined to enter the kingdom. But the fact is that no such gate ever existed. Another example is the interpretation that many pastors like to use that Jesus perceived that wealth was this particular man’s special “weak spot,” and so he zeroed in on it only to expose the man’s distinctive shortcoming. This gives us permission to assume that Jesus would not ask us to part with our possessions, just those things that we really do not want to give up.

But the problem with such interpretations is that they are not faithful to the challenge of the gospel. They also rob us from the opportunity to grow in our relationship with God. So, what was Jesus trying to say or do?

I think in order to understand what Jesus was trying to do, we have to understand his concept of the Kingdom of God. This was the main focus of his teaching. Often times, we tend to think of the kingdom of God as something that happens after death, in heaven. But the kingdom of God to which Jesus was referring is about life here and now. It is about the renewal of the Covenant that God has made with the people of Israel. This covenant was about not just the spiritual matters of life, but also the political and economic issues of life. According to biblical scholar Richard Horsley in his book *Covenant Economics: A Biblical Vision of Justice for All*, the original covenant with the people of Israel was that of not only faith and politics but also economics. “The general trend in ancient Near Eastern societies was for the peasant producers to lose their economic rights to land, as well as the fruits of their labor, to the wealthy and powerful...Two dominating factors made the ancient Near Eastern economy work, despite its gross inequality and crass exploitation of the people. One factor was coercion. The rulers had military forces at their disposal...Equally or perhaps even more important as a motivating factor making the economic system work was the religious-cultural dimension...The starting point is to note again that religion and political-economy were inseparable. The ‘houses of the gods,’ which we call ‘temples,’ were also centers of political-economic power...Kings were sacred, declared at their

coronation to be “the son of god.” Taxes were sacred obligations, and tithes were the economic revenues of the houses of the gods...The people were thus grateful to the divine forces or extremely fearful of their potential anger and destructiveness.” So anyone in those days who was wealthy, was part of the group that was exploiting the peasants and their families.

So, when God established the Covenant with the people of Israel, it was a radical invitation to release the people from exploitation, to create a community of faith and a culture that did not establish a domination system in government or religion. In fact, there were laws set up as part of the covenant to insure that the peasants were protected. To give you just a few examples we can see that the people of Israel were not allowed to serve other gods because it led to financial hardships. They had a Sabbath day so that workers would have the right to rest. The land allotted to each family was inalienable and could not be permanently sold or taken away (Lev. 25:23). A tithe was to be given every third year to be stored in the villages as a supply of surplus food for the resident aliens, orphans, widows and the Levites. There was a strong prohibition of interest (Deut. 23:19. Lev. 25:35-37). There was a mandate for cancellation of debts (Deuteronomy 15:1-2), “Every seventh year you shall grant a remission of debts.” All these practices and others were part of God’s relationship with the people, the Covenant, the kingdom of God. So, when Jesus talks about the covenant, the kingdom, he is not only dealing with the spiritual matters of faith. He is also dealing with the day-to-day aspects of life. With this understanding of the Covenant, it makes a lot of sense that Jesus would ask the rich man to give away his possessions. His wealth came to him through the exploitation of others because of the unjust system of the temple, the kings and the Roman Empire. In that period of time, that was the only way to be wealthy because the economy was based on farming and subsistence and if people truly practiced the laws of letting go of debts and releasing the debt lands every few years, then no one could really get very rich unless they don’t follow the laws of God. What a difficult message that must have been for the rich man! What a difficult message it was even for the disciples because they too didn’t really understand it. Their reality was so different from what Jesus was envisioning. The original vision for the covenant of God was forgotten by many among the people of Israel. By the time Jesus came around they had lived under corrupt kings and occupation for too long to imagine a different kind of world or even economic system. For the majority faith was reduced to temple rituals, the knowledge of the law and the personal practice of piety. Their national hopes were for another king and not for the reliving of the laws of the Covenant.

How do we hear this message of Jesus today? How does this vision of the kingdom of God challenge our economic assumptions and practices today? Of course, we live in a very different time today and being wealthy is not always about exploiting others. But the question still remains before us: Does our economy as it stands today reflect the values of the Covenant of God? Does it provide protections against the exploitation of the poor? Does it have protections in it for our modern day aliens, orphans and widows, i.e., the most vulnerable among us? We have been accustomed as modern people to the idea that survival of the fittest is the way our economy operates. But how does faith factor into our political and economic decisions?

In his book *Jesus Today: A Spirituality of Radical Freedom*, Albert Nolan begins his book with this paragraph: “On the whole we don’t take Jesus seriously----whether we call ourselves Christians or not. There are some remarkable exceptions, but by and large we don’t love our enemies, we don’t turn the other cheek, we don’t forgive seventy times seven times, we don’t bless those who curse us, we don’t share what we have with the poor, and we don’t put all our hope and trust in God. We have our excuses. I am no saint. It is not meant for everybody, surely? It’s a great ideal, but it’s not very practical in this day and age.”

I am thankful that God's love for us is not conditional. It is not dependent on whether we get this ideal of the kingdom of God or not. In fact, even in this story, the Gospel records that when Jesus looked at the rich man, he looked at him with love and acceptance, and not with judgment or resentment. This is the only way we can live up to this challenge of Christ. The only way we can be deeply and radically transformed in our ways of understanding money and the economy is through our relationship with God and solidarity with those who are oppressed. Shinichi Zuzuki once said, "When love is deep, much can be accomplished." I believe this to be true of our own experience of faith. The deeper we get in our relationship with God, the more we see that all aspects of our lives are informed and influenced by our faith. The same is true when we allow ourselves to be completely open to those who suffer, we can allow them into our hearts where God can bring new insights into our minds.

So, I invite you today to allow yourself to get closer to God and to allow God into all the aspects of your life including your money. I know with this kind of intimacy with God, you will experience greater financial freedom. This freedom does not come from getting more but from learning to give more and even need less.

Once on the Great Sabbath before the Passover a rabbi came home from the house of prayer with weary steps. "What made you so tired?" asked his wife. "It was the sermon," he replied. "I had to speak of the poor and their many needs for the coming Passover. Unleavened bread and wine and everything else is terribly high this year." "And what did you accomplish with your sermon?" his wife asked. "Half of what is needed," he answered. "You see, the poor are now ready to take. As for the other half, whether the rich are ready to give –I don't know about that yet." Amen.