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“God Has Provided: Money”

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Mark 10: 17-27

For many years I really disliked Stewardship Sunday in a church.
I disliked it because I felt it put me in the awkward position of begging for money.
And talking to people about something very personal and private.

But I have changed my mind about Stewardship Sunday in recent years.

I find that I like inviting people to become more generous,
because generosity is a distinctive characteristic of people of God.

And I also enjoy thinking about what our money can do,
how wonderful it is for us to invest in something so important,
so vital, and so much bigger than all of us.

More than anything else, I love watching you as you come forward to put your
pledge cards into the little wooden church.

It reminds me that you care about this ministry we share, that you love God and are
willing to give and even sacrifice so that our ministry remains vital.

Stewardship Sunday reminds me of the sacred trust we share as stewards.
God has blessed us with financial resources so that together we can change the
world.

So even though I like Stewardship Sunday much more than I used to,
there is no denying the fact that money is a touchy thing to talk about.
You have really crossed the line when you start taking to people about their
money.

Just go up to someone and ask them about their annual income or net worth.
Ask about their investments, or what tax bracket they are in.
People do not like to talk about money, especially their own money.

I suspect that is precisely why Jesus talked about money all the time.
Even when it made him unpopular, and made folks uncomfortable.
He knew that our relationship to money is deeply complicated and emotional.

He knew that where our treasure is, our hearts will be also.
Jesus taught in Parables, and a full 27 of them deal with money.

While there are 500 verses in Scripture that deal with prayer,
and about 500 verses that deal with faith,
there are nearly 2500 that deal with money and possessions.

This issue is at the heart of our spirituality and discipleship.
It is something which simply cannot be ignored by people of faith.

So, I want you to think about your relationship with money today.
 How do you feel about it? Do you worry about it?
 Do you always want more of it? What does money represent in your life?
 From earliest times, money has had a powerful grip on the human heart.

Seashells were the first currency in the world, and shell money was found
 by archaeologists in Asia, Europe, and Africa.

The Yap islanders in the South Pacific used big money. Really big money.

Their largest currency is an 18 foot high stone ring that weighs 15 tons.

Their pocket change is 30" in diameter and weighs over 100 pounds.

They are giant rock donuts with a hole in the middle so they can be carried on a
 pole. The exchange value of one coin is 10,000 coconuts, 1/4 acre of land,
 an 18 foot canoe, or one wife.

In the Congo money was symbolized by a copper cross, minted in various sizes.

Whether a cross or a 15 ton stone, money is only symbolic of something else.

And Jesus repeatedly stressed that we need to be careful of the power it has.

It can seduce us, betray us, and even destroy us.

That was the rich young ruler's problem. Money meant too much to him.

He thought it was all his, not provided to him by God.

He was so afraid to let any of it go.

He thought that if he let it go, there would be nothing left.

He lived in fear, and so he went away sorrowful.

He is like so many of us. We trust in the laws of scarcity, instead of abundance.

We are afraid that if we give too much, there will be nothing left at all.

We have to protect our money, hang onto it, or it will disappear.

Money in itself not evil, but the love of money, the obsession with money,
 the fear of losing it becomes evil because it allows money to replace God.

And what is the very first commandment?

You shall have no other Gods but God. But money tries very hard to be our God.

Therefore, it is so important for us to remember that money has been provided to
 us by God so that we can bless the world.

And what a privilege it is to be generous. What an honor to know that because
 we were generous, someone will go to bed with a full stomach for a change,
 or have a warm place to sleep, or have medicine, or peace of mind, or hope.

There is no better feeling in the world.

Have you noticed that stingy, greedy people are always miserable?
 Read Charles Dickens or Shakespeare, or Victor Hugo
 you will see again and again in both life and literature that truly greedy people
 are always viewed as sad and miserable people.

Cultural icon Oprah Winfrey knows about the blessings of generosity.
 Not only does she give lots and lots of her own money away all the time
 (of course she has plenty to give!!),

but she invites her viewers to become more generous themselves.

On a recent show she gave \$1000 to each person in attendance.
 But it was not for them to keep. She told them it had to be used to bless someone.
 It could not be given to family or friends, and had to be used within one week.

The stories of what that money has done are incredible.

One woman used it to help someone have reconstructive surgery on her face.

Another gave it to a family of 6 for a deposit on an apartment.

Someone else gave it to a battered woman so she could leave her husband.

That money was matched by others, and has gone all around the world.

It has fed the hungry, housed the homeless, gave hope to those in despair.

Of course, this is nothing new, because that is exactly what the church of Jesus
 Christ does all the time.

Through a strange spiritual alchemy, our money is magically transformed into
 ministry. It is used to bless, heal, touch and transform.

We do not hold onto money here. Whatever we get, we spend, we give away.
 And even if we had no overhead costs whatsoever, we would still ask for money,
 because it is good for you to give.

The primary purpose of the church is to make disciples,
 and disciples are generous, giving people.

We invite you to be generous not as much for our sake, but for your own.
 Growing in generosity helps you become a better person, to be a part of something
 eternal, and get your priorities straight.

Be thankful that the church needs your money, because giving to the church
 helps you grow, mature, and grow closer to God.

Of course the Biblical model is the tithe, giving God the first 10% of all that
 we receive. Tithing has deep roots in our Judeo-Christian tradition,
 and our spiritual ancestors were rigorous about giving God the first fruits
 of anything that they received. Tithing is a worthy goal for us all.

You may not feel ready to give back to God 10% of what he has given you.
 But at the very least, we should put God first, give God the first fruits
 not just what is left over.

One of my all time favorite hymns is the Hymn of Promise by Natalie Sleeth.

Every time I sing that Hymn, I think of her faith and hope.

Natalie endured Multiple Sclerosis and cancer with such grace and courage.

Even in the midst of terrible suffering she could write:

*“In the bulb there is a flower, in the seed an apple tree;
 in cocoons, a hidden promise, butterflies will soon be free!
 In the cold and snow of winter there’s a spring that waits to be,
 unrevealed until its season, something God alone can see.”*

Unrevealed until it’s season—something God alone can see.

That is the story of the Lakewood United Methodist Church.

There is so much untapped promise in this congregation, so much potential.

You see, I know what you are capable of.

I have seen you raise \$15,000 in a week for Katrina relief.

I have seen you work with homeless families, and those in need in our community.

I have seen you step up in service and generosity when you feel passionate
 about something. I know what you are capable of.

Someone once said that what people fear most in themselves is not apathy or evil,
 but the good in themselves, because the good is so demanding.

What if we were willing to unleash all of the goodness inside of us,
 and commit to change the world for Jesus’ sake?

What if we stepped out in faith and tried to do impossible things?

What if we believed that this congregation could change the world?

There is so much more that we could do together if we believed that we could!

Perhaps our sin is that we are just too comfortable.

During our 5 congregational meetings we asked you what you liked about
 our church, and what needed improvement.

You liked lots of things, most of all: The people. Again and again, the people.

It’s true—some of the best Christian people I have ever known are here.

You said you liked the staff, and I am proud of this staff—we could not do better.

You said there is excellence in worship and our programming.

You said that we are open and tolerant and diverse.

Our church is comfortable, someone said, it is like coming home.

You said we promote spirituality that is relevant.

We are multi-generational, and that is a blessing to those without family nearby.

We are deeply concerned about others,
with a genuine commitment to missions and outreach to the less fortunate.

What are the things we could do better?

The majority of your comments had to do with the building, interestingly enough.

Things such as more color, warmth, overall appearance, and visibility.

One comment was that we are not using the building nearly enough.

We need more inviting space for children and youth.

There is a deep concern that we are not more ethnically diverse.

We need more money to do more good in the world.

We need many more of our members involved in leadership,
and we need to grow.

I think those comments are right on target in terms of our strengths and
weaknesses.

But I wonder, what are we going to do about it?

Will we sit back and hope that somebody else takes care of these things?

Will we leave it to the staff or lay leadership to figure it all out?

What if we ourselves tried to be the congregation of our dreams right now?

What if we committed to be the very best that we could possibly be right now?

What if we stepped up our service to our community right now?

What if we all increased our giving by just 5% right now?

What if we viewed our money as something God has temporarily provided to us so
that we could change the world right now?

Rev. William Sloane Coffin defined stewardship like this:

“To be good stewards requires that we live a life that focuses not so much on our
needs as on our potentials.”

That is visionary living, and more and more we should think not in terms of what
we need, as much as what we are capable of becoming.

There are critical decisions before us, and the future of this church is in our hands.

We will vote on these matters on December 31 and January 7.

And whether we stay here or move somewhere else, we must reinvent ourselves.

We will have to create a brand new church here or somewhere else.

And it will demand so much from all of us.

*“There’s a song in every silence, seeking word and melody;
there’s a dawn in every darkness, bringing hope to you and me.
From the past will come the future, what it holds, a mystery,
unrevealed until its season, something God alone can see.”*

For 125 years this church has been changing lives, one person at a time.
We have inherited something so sacred, so precious, that it defies description.

We are building a spiritual legacy here not just for ourselves, or even
for our children and grandchildren.

We are building a spiritual legacy for those we cannot see,
just like those who went before us have done for us.

Although they did not know us, I’ll bet they thought about us.

I’ll bet they prayed for us, and sacrificed for us, and hoped we would not forget
them.

Let us honor those who have gone before us, and those who will come after us,
by investing all that we can in our church today.

Thanks Be To God.