

Life Together -- Sharing

So do you know that thing kids do when you tell them we're about to do something they don't want to do...."kids, we're going to clean our rooms today...." "But Daddd....."

I don't know about you, but I find myself as an adult wanting to do that sometimes too.

Over the next few weeks, we're going to talk about money. Ok, ok, ok...I get it...if you want to let out an audible groan, if you want to give me a, "But R.G.....," you can.

You want to try it – "we're going to talk about money..."

In all seriousness though, my guess is that I could ask thousands of church goers what their favorite sermon topics might be and not a single one would say, "Money." And yet, we have this thing called a church budget. We have a staff we have to pay. We have building expenses. We have ministry to fund. So whereas talking about money is not our favorite topic to hear about in church and it's certainly not my favorite topic to preach about, this time of year, churches all over have stewardship or pledge campaigns where we talk about money. We have to encourage people to make pledges and give. It's necessary.

But what I find interesting is that our biblical writers don't seem to have the same reluctance in talking about money that we do. In fact, money is the second most common topic that Jesus addresses in the gospels. The prophets in the Old Testament talked about money a lot. So we have this situation where we have a topic that none of us want to talk about in church, but our Scripture talks about all the time. What's going on here?

I think a large part of this discrepancy has to do with the cultural differences from our time and the time of the Biblical writers. We live in a very individualistic culture. It's considered a virtue to be self sufficient. We have personal checking and personal savings and personal retirement accounts. What we do with our money is very much thought of as an individual or a family matter.

But that wasn't the case for the biblical writers. They didn't live in an individualistic culture but rather a communal one. The question they confronted was not, "What is best for me?" And it wasn't even, "What is best for my family?" Rather, the question was "What is best for our community?" That's a big difference in perspective, right.

And so over these next few weeks, I want to invite us to think of our giving to the church with that question in mind. **What does it mean to be a part of a community that depends on each of us being generous with our time and with our financial resources?**

In our Old Testament reading, the Hebrew people were in the wilderness and they were hungry. So God sent them manna – bread from heaven. But in doing so, God was not only

providing for them but rather God was teaching them a basic principle for living together in community – you have to share with each other. Listen to the words of Moses, “Take only what you need for you and your family for one day.”

The people had just escaped slavery in Egypt where Pharaoh operated on the principle of taking not what he needed but taking whatever he wanted – money, land, people. God was calling the people not just to leave Egypt but to create a different kind of community. Whereas Pharaoh believed he could take whatever he wanted, whenever he wanted, God was asking the people to consider each other. Take what you need but make sure there’s enough left for others

This same reality was lived out by the early church. Unlike the Israelites, the early Church was not able to escape the dominant society in which they lived. All of the early Christians lived under the rule of the Roman empire, an empire also built on excess. In some ways, Rome’s excess was more sophisticated than Pharaoh’s. Rome claimed to be enlightened. They offered freedom of religion...under certain conditions. Basically, what Rome wanted more than anything was to keep taxes flowing into Rome to fund the empire’s extravagance. That’s why they conquered so many territories. They stripped their conquered territories of their natural resources to fund their opulence and thus created a world of extreme inequality of haves and have nots. In fact, people lived in such deep poverty that they had to sell themselves into slavery just so they could have the basic survival necessities.

Like the Israelites before them, the early church tried to live out a different reality. Listen again to these words from Acts:

Acts 4: 32-35: Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common. ³³ With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. ³⁴ There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold. ³⁵ They laid it at the apostles’ feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need.

In a society where Rome made accumulating more and more and more a virtue, the early Church went so far as to relinquish all claims to private ownership. By accepting that limit, they actually ensured that no one would be in need. But notice how the writer describes their life together – the apostles gave testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus and there was not a needy person among them. The writer connects the very bedrock of Christianity – Jesus’ resurrection – to the way the early Christians shared with one another. Living in such a way that looks out not just for individual interest but for the common good of all is the very heart of Christianity.

Now, we are a long way from that time and I’m not suggesting that all of us need to empty out our checking accounts and retirement funds. I’m not. But what I am suggesting is that we can think about the power we have to use our money, time, and resources to make a huge impact in this community.

Last week, Frank mentioned all the things that happen in this building every week. I want you to think about that for a minute.

Think about that young family who knows their child has an incredible preschool they can go to because we house the Centre School.

Think about that trans kid who is being homeschooled because they don't feel safe in middle school but have found a safe haven at Rainbow Youth and for a little while tonight they can just be without worrying whether or not they will be accepted.

Think about the person who wants more than anything to get help for their alcohol addiction and they walk into a room in our church and find a community of healing, a community that will journey with them to sobriety.

These are all things that happen in our building every week. Now think about the things we do together as a church.

Think about how you feel when our choir or our soloists move us to tears with such incredible music.

Think about the person who gets one of the coats from the Board of Benevolence coat drive or maybe even more importantly the person whose child gets one of those coats and they know their kid won't have to go to school cold this winter.

Think about our kids in Sunday school being able to learn that there is a God who loves them unconditionally.

Think about the times when you needed support, and this community was here for you.

None of these things can happen without you. All of this happens because of your generosity.

You see, the great teaching our faith offers us about money is that deep down it's a spiritual matter. We have an opportunity to use our money in a way that can make people's lives better, that can make our community better. Whether it's the Hebrew slaves eating Manna in the wilderness or the early Church making sure there was no one in need among them, or our life together today – when we share our resources with each other, then what we find is that we are all better off.

In both the Old and New Testament, God's vision for our life together is one where we live out a different reality than Pharaoh's Egypt, a different reality than the Roman empire, a different reality than individualism where we just take care of ourselves. We are invited to enter into the joy of sharing our resources with everyone in this community and beyond so that so many good things are able to happen for all of us.

