

Wesley United Methodist Church  
October 6, 2019

Text: Matthew 22:15-22  
It's a Wonder-Full Life  
Looking Back

I think that God has a wonderful sense of humor. A few weeks ago when our scripture was about Jeremiah buying a field even though he was in prison and didn't know if he would ever be able to use the field, I was waiting to hear if an offer I had placed on a condominium would be accepted. It wasn't.

This week, I found myself spending time running the numbers again and trying to determine if I could really afford to buy a condo. I identified some of my anxieties were and emotions. I could almost hear God chuckle gently as I had to face the irony that this week we are beginning a series that encourages us to look at how we view money and what really constitutes a wonderful life.

Like many pastors I am familiar with the experience of thinking about something on Tuesday or Wednesday and hearing the words of the sermon I preached on Sunday coming back to call me to account.

I found myself asking why I feel certain ways about money and why it feels important to me to purchase rather than to rent. When I am honest with myself, I can look back to my parents and to events in my life that have strongly influenced the answers to those questions.

Marcia McFee, in the worship series that is influencing much of our worship during the month of October, reminds us that "our relationship with money has a history as long as our lives but also as expansive as the family systems and culture of which we are a part." She reminds us that

our faith helps us look at these things but also very importantly reminds us of our true worth.<sup>i</sup>

By the way, if you are feeling at all uncomfortable knowing that we are going to be talking about money – please know that you are not alone. I am just as uncomfortable, and I don't have the option of waking up on Sunday morning and deciding not to show up for worship. But I also know that the way we understand and use money and other possessions was very important to Jesus. Jesus talked more about money and possessions than about any other subject – including prayer, or the kingdom of God.

Jesus doesn't allow us to say that we can put all of the things about our spiritual life, our prayer, Bible study, worship and other God things in one box and then put all the rest of our lives – our relationships, our work, our money, our political views and everything else into a different box never allowing the two to come into contact with each other. Instead, Jesus says that one influences the other; they are all mixed in together and our health in one area affects our health in every other area.

In today's scripture the Pharisees – the religious authorities – have conspired with the Herodians – people who supported the Roman government – to put Jesus in the hot seat. They ask him what, on the surface, appears to be a simple question. “Does the Law allow people to pay taxes to Caesar or not?”

Either a “yes” or “no” will get him in trouble. If he says “no” then he will be reported to the Roman government as a seditious person and he will be arrested. If he says “yes” he will be discredited in the eyes of the people who are following him. The Jewish people believed that God was the only king, and so for some, to pay tax to an earthly king was to insult God.

Jesus was placed right in the middle of an impossible situation involving how money was to be used. But behind that question was the bigger one of what position God held in their lives. Jesus' answer "puts money in perspective, but it is a complex perspective. The people live within the oppressor's systems of money and the Romans have the power to take it. But throughout Jesus' ministry, he indicates that ALL things are within the realm of God. Even the decisions made about what to do with money have spiritual implications."<sup>ii</sup>

The same is true for us today. We know that the systems of money today are not always fair or equitable. How can they be when the wealthiest 85 people on the entire planet have more money than the poorest 3.5 billion people combined?<sup>iii</sup> "And yet, how we live within that system is a matter of spirituality and faith formation because it affects our sense of call to do as much good in the world as we can."<sup>iv</sup>

If we deny this difficult, complex relationship with money and live in fear of facing it, then it can rob us of our influence and our ability to use money for good. It's important for us to be willing to look at our own histories to see how our attitudes and use of money have been influenced by the system in which we live as well as the history of those systems.

The first church that I was appointed to serve was a small church that was in the process of putting on an addition so they would have space for Sunday School classes and small groups to meet. They also had a history of making elaborate decorations and settings for Vacation Bible School. Shortly after the addition was completed it was time to set up for VBS. The woman in charge of this was also the treasurer, a trustee, and the chair of the building committee.

I was amazed to see her lay tarpaulins on the floor and then cover the tarpaulins with sand to create a beach setting. Her actions made it very clear that the space had been designed to be used for the education of the children. While she took care to protect the new floors, she also made a clear statement that this space was not to become an idol or something to be worshipped but was to be used for God's work among the children of the community.

I have been in enough trustee, finance or church council meetings in many different churches to know that churches have a history of how they think their finances and their building are to be used. That history and attitude, whatever it may be, can carry forward through many generations. It becomes part of the often-unspoken expectations that churches and other organizations carry in their daily functioning.

Some of us here were part of the churches that came together to form Wesley Church. Most of the people who actually made many of the decisions have since passed on, but some of us, as their children or as young adults at the time, have memories of some of the decisions that were made.

I have vivid memories of discussions and debates about the design of this building. Now, please remember that I was a young teenager during most of that time, so my memory may not be entirely accurate. But let me share one particular piece that I think I remember and why it is important.

The original plans for this campus included three buildings connected by walkways or corridors rather than the two that we have. The ceiling of this sanctuary was to be 20 feet higher than it is now. Some thought the price for all this was astronomical. Others thought it was quite realistic.

Ultimately it was the cost that precipitated the broader conversation and the redesign of the building.

The conversation was about what the purpose of the building was to be and how the space was to be used for ministry. It was also about how much money was realistic for that congregation to spend and also what kind of debt was realistic for them to take on.

My father was one of the people on that committee. He was 14 when the stock market crashed in 1929. He left school after 8<sup>th</sup> grade and like many in his generation, he worked hard to make money doing whatever he could find.

I'm sure that living through that and the next ten years of the depression had a profound effect upon how he viewed money: how he earned it, used it, and felt about it. I imagine that all this came into play as he and others of his generation made decisions about how to build this church. I imagine that they might also have clashed with some of those who were younger and might have had different experiences.

We are part of a complex system of diverse experiences and cultures that have made each of us who we are today. Despite what I believe about my father, we cannot assume from someone's appearance, age, or gender that we know what experiences and attitudes have shaped that person.

Many of us may not even really understand what experiences have influenced the way we understand money and possessions and how we spend them or save them. We may not be aware of how we make the decisions that may or may not make sense to someone else or even to ourselves.

I hope that one of the benefits of our Future Possibility Study today is that we may begin to understand ourselves better both as individuals and

as a community of faith. I pray that as we look back, look around us, and also look to the future, we may be open to the ways that God is working in and through each of us and all of us.

The important principle that Jesus taught us in this passage is that we are part of multiple communities. We are part of the country where we live and we benefit from the systems of that country – the systems of utilities, roads, education, medicine and so forth. We have obligations to our country.

At the same time, we are also, and foremost, children of God. We turn to God to seek guidance when our multiple communities or commitments come into conflict. We turn to God for our everyday lives so that we can hold in balance all the many pieces of life – our relationships, our money, our possessions, our past, our today, and our future. When we do this as part of a community of faith, we discover that we are in good company.

We do live in a complex world of money that is not easy to navigate. In fact, at times it can feel discouraging. But we can shift away from the underlying dread and fear of it by bringing it into the light of Wisdom. We can take the stigma and shame out of it by seeing our worth and worthiness in light of God’s unlimited love and grace. This allows us to face whatever happens with hope and the assurance that we are not alone.<sup>v</sup>

---

<sup>i</sup> McFee, Marcia. [www.worshipdesignstudio.com](http://www.worshipdesignstudio.com) Worship series: It’s a Wonder-Full Life. Synopsis for Week 1.

<sup>ii</sup> Ibid. This comes from the document of “Sermon Fodder”. Other unattributed quotes or phrases also come from that source.

<sup>iii</sup> Kulyk, Maggie. [Integrating Money and Meaning](#). Loc 390. Sources cited in her endnotes

<sup>iv</sup> McFee

<sup>v</sup> McFee.