

“Reaching Beyond Former Ways”

Matthew 5:38-48

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One of the most critical issues for families and individuals to figure out, is what to do with the financial resources in our lives.

This is really a tough area for most of us. It is filled with history, emotions, hopes, dreams, ethics, politics, morality, enjoyment and angst. Our finances can be a minefield for our relationships and our communities. It is so important that we direct our finances and not the other way around. No matter how much or how little money we have we are not to be enslaved by our savings or our debt. Money is a tool for us, it is not the master of us. We are what has value, people are what God loves, it is our joy that matters. Perhaps the first step of addressing our finances is to keep money in its place. When we read in the Bible that “the love of money is the root of evil”, we are reading a spiritual way that we keep money in its proper place. Money cannot be the object of our love, money is only a tool that provides one way for us to impact what we care about, but it is only one tool, it is limited and we are not limited by its presence or absence.

The Beatles got it right when they sang “Money Can’t Buy Me Love”, and don’t even begin to say; “yeah but it helps.”

It is always interesting to hear how families deal with their finances, how they set up bank accounts, which credit cards they do and don’t get, how they determine who gets to spend what.

The last time a family described their financial system to me they said they had three checking accounts. This was a married couple whose kids were grown and out of the house. They said they had one account from which they paid all household bills – insurance, mortgage, food, cars, other debt, even their church pledge. Then they each had their own checking accounts that they could use as they wanted. They didn’t say how they decided how much went into these individual accounts. They didn’t say whether these accounts were equal, but they did say this seemed to work for them. They had only one source of income, but they never spoke of the income being his or hers, they spoke of their income as their household income.

Every household needs to develop a system that works for them. Each household needs to talk about common basic needs, about how frugal and how extravagant they

want to be and in what areas. Each household, whether it has one member or five needs to agree, to a significant extent, on what is important regarding the use of its finances.

From my experience, households, families, parents and children, individuals need to think and have conversations about finances multiple times. Because our financial decisions are influenced by so many aspects of our lives, the re-evaluation of our decisions is important. It is also the case that most of our financial decisions affect more than our individual lives – they affect our spouses, our kids, our parents, our communities, strangers, our environment. For this reason we need to revisit our financial decision – life changes, circumstances change, people change, so how we make decisions will change. Our decisions about what to do with our wealth, large or small, is connected to what is taking place in our lives, not just our external lives but also our internal lives. Like so much of what we choose to do with the lives we are given, our internal lives – our spirit, our understandings, our dreams, our loves -- are really what guides the decisions we make. This is what Jesus says – “Where your treasure is, there will your heart will be also.”

Because it is our hearts that have such great power to influence our decisions, but are often discounted, that Jesus speaks so much about our hearts.

In our gospel passage for this morning Jesus uses heart language to address people’s concerns about one’s enemies. He talks about loving one’s enemies instead of hating them. Loving and hating are concerns of the heart, not the brain. Though I firmly believe that our faith needs to enlist our thinking, thinking is not the most powerful dimension of our lives – without our hearts we lose contact with the greatest gifts of living.

Jesus doesn’t tell the people, “think differently about your enemies” because he knows that much of what determines whether someone is our enemy or not has little to do with rational thinking. Mostly what makes someone our enemy has to do with our emotions, how we feel about someone else. Jesus says our enemies become the object of our hate, and when we hate someone we feel justified in doing horrible things to them. It is our hate that allows us to “demonize” others.

Jesus tells his followers to “love your enemies and to pray for them...” He knows that when we love and pray for someone we cannot demonize them, and when we stop hating and pointing to “others” as the problem, we stop trying to eliminate them and we open ourselves to listening. No matter what we call each other Jesus says we are all in the same boat of life, “God causes the sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends

rain on the righteous and unrighteous.” The point being, it matters little what we call each other, the reality is we must learn to live with each other and this will make all the difference. “Love your enemy and pray for them...” and they will no longer be your enemy.

Jesus knew that our hearts need to be taught as much as our brains do. There are many people who want to teach our hearts to hate because it creates an environment for people to be devalued and discounted. So Jesus teaches our hearts to love, to love even our enemies, because it creates a world where every person is considered valuable.

I was in Madison at the capital all day on Friday. It was a very powerful experience. I have been to the capital for many events over the years, but what is taking place in our state right now is more powerful than anything I have experienced before. The course of history is not a straight line, it zigzags in all different directions and takes turns that are sudden and unexpected.

I am always amazed at the power of our financial decision making, personal and public. I am always dumbfounded by the emotional fervor that is whipped up when we speak about how we will use our financial resources. If you think that budgets are rational documents, developed objectively with unbiased data and principles, you are gravely mistaken. Jesus’ words, “where your treasure is, there will your heart be also,” are as true for our public treasures as it is for our personal treasure. Budgets are emotional documents and they say volumes about our hearts and values.

One of the most surprising and consistent statements I heard from the speakers and people holding signs is that the unions are willing to negotiate salaries and benefits, but they are unwilling to give up collective bargaining rights. The teachers, nurses, county workers, police, firefighters and all the public workers that were at the capital said that they are flexible regarding their salaries but they refused to be removed from the discussion. One union person’s sign read: “together we negotiate, alone we beg!”

A spokesperson for the Republican caucus said, “we need the flexibility in the budget process to not have to negotiate with public employees.” Another speaker for the unions responded by saying, “we are not the problem, we are the solution.”

For those that argue public employees don’t deserve a place at the bargaining table there is an underlying emotional element regarding their decisions. This element is best characterized by the libertarian belief that taxes of any type take away what belongs to individuals – their hard earned money. For libertarians there is no higher moral value

than the individual and they believe that individuals make their own way with no help and no interference. They regard public employees as charity cases that are dependent on the hard work of “real” people, and therefore don’t deserve a place to negotiate, they should be happy that they get anything at all.

The notion that our financial success is due purely to our own ingenuity and resourcefulness is an unbiblical and un-Christian belief. From the earliest writings of scripture to the teachings of Jesus, to the Pilgrims that came to the shores of N. America, the wellbeing and prosperity of people rested deeply in the hands of our generous God. And because this is true our Christian teachings have consistently lifted up the perils of personal prosperity with little or no regard for the wellbeing of others. The idea that people have no claim on each other was dismissed in the story of Cain and Abel and is reported over and over again throughout scripture. Not only is it un-Christian to speak of the blessings we enjoy as purely private possessions, it is also un-Christian to believe that what we choose to do with the wealth we are stewards of is no one else’s business, especially not God’s.

There are many places in the Bible that try to give guidance to how generous we need to be. In the Hebrew scripture people were taught to tithe – to give a tenth of all they have to God. In the gospels Jesus tells the rich young man to sell all he has and to give it to the poor. The purpose of all the teachings are at least two fold and are worth our considering when it comes to our household budgets as well as our state and national budgets: 1) we are to view all that we have as gifts and blessings, not as possessions earned purely for our own purposes as if their use has no consequence on the lives of others, 2) and we are not to act as if others have no claim on their use.

Our Christian faith proclaims the great generosity of our God. In response we live with great gratitude in our hearts and great love for all people, even those we have called our enemies. May we hold fast to the rewards of God’s kingdom as we make decisions about our finances and wealth in our homes, our church, our community, our state and our world.