

Matthew 21:12-17 ¹² Then Jesus entered the temple and drove out all who were selling and buying in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who sold doves. ¹³ He said to them, "It is written: 'My house shall be called a house of prayer'; but you are making it a den of robbers." ¹⁴ The blind and the lame came to him in the temple, and he cured them. ¹⁵ But when the chief priests and the scribes saw the amazing things that he did, and heard the children crying out in the temple, "Hosanna to the Son of David," they became angry ¹⁶ and said to him, "Do you hear what these are saying?" Jesus said to them, "Yes; have you never read, 'Out of the mouths of infants and nursing babies, you have prepared praise for yourself'?" ¹⁷ He left them, went out of the city to Bethany, and spent the night there.

Matthew 21:12-17

10/11/2020 – Saginaw First U.M.C.

"Stewardship One: A Part of Something Transformative"

Pastor Amy Terhune

This week, we begin our stewardship campaign. It's a time of the year that no one, including the preacher, really looks forward to because nobody wants to hear about or talk about money. And I get that. It's been something of a sticky wicket since the early church started dealing with it back in the 1st century. In various letters, the apostle Paul both praises and chastises churches about giving, which seems to suggest that even back then, it was a fine line to walk, and not everybody handled it as Paul would have liked. So I take some comfort in the fact that the church has always struggled with how best to handle the topic.

In writing about the topic some years ago, Dr. John Thompson Peters pointed out that "...the so-called Christian attitude towards money is too often represented as regarding money as "evil" but necessary. The church apologizes for her need for money and again and again compromises the truth and the vital nature of her mission by making ridiculous statements about her need for money under a superficial spiritual facade. [from *"The Stewardship of Money in the Modern Church"* by Dr. John Thompson Peters, www.Sermons.com.]

Two months ago, Ed Cunningham, Anne Marks-Gaertner and I had an opportunity to take a class being offered online through the Michigan Conference of the United Methodist Church on Stewardship. It met on Wednesday at lunch-hour for four weeks, and I was grateful to both of them that they gave up that time in order to think a little bit more intentionally about the topic. The instructor was a woman named Rebekah Simon-Peter (great name!) who challenged us to think about the messages we'd grown up with around money, and the ways that our childhood and our lived experiences influenced how we think about money, perhaps subconsciously. Is it evil? A source of strife? Something we're happy to have but reluctant to ask for, particularly as leaders in the church?

She's right to challenge us to think about it. Jesus did quite regularly. New Testament scholar N.T. Wright has gone through the gospels and pulled out everything Jesus says about money. He notes that if one was to layer those verses throughout the gospels evenly, Jesus would be saying something about money every 4 or 5 verses. It's that prevalent. Jesus knew that human beings need things – things like food, housing, clothing – things it takes money to buy. But he also knew that money was God's single biggest rival when it came to the commitments of the mind, heart, and life. He knew how the fear of 'not enough' could shrivel the human spirit into a self-focused, cold-hearted, and fundamentally unhappy and unhealthy little thing. Ebenezer Scrooge comes immediately to mind, but

he's really a caricature of a far more complex and troubling trend in human development in modern times.

But perhaps the most helpful and hopeful word Rebekah Simon-Peter gave us was this: Jesus wasn't about money, but about a dream – "Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done on earth". We pray it every week. Stewardship of that dream is the church's most vital task. Prayers, presence, gifts, service – time, talent, treasure – money – all of these are simply avenues by which the dream may inch closer to reality.

There's a silly story going around about two factory workers, Joe and Lester, who were talking.

"I know how to get some time off from work," said Joe.

"How do you think you'll do that?" asked Lester.

Joe proceeded to climb up to the rafters of the factory and hang upside down by his knees. The boss walked in, saw Joe hanging from the ceiling, and asked him what on earth he was doing.

"I'm a light bulb," Joe answered.

"I think you need to take some time off," said the boss.

So, Joe jumped down and walked out of the factory.

Lester started walking out, too, at which point, the boss said, "Hey, where do you think you're going?"

"Home." said Lester, "I can't work in the dark." [*silly story from Dynamic Preaching, November 2004; as used in "If, Because, Regardless" by Billy D. Strayhorn, www.Sermons.com.*]

In his day, Jesus was concerned that the religious leadership was far too comfortable working in the dark. Keep in mind that today's lesson immediately follows Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem to waving palm branches and children singing hosanna. It's five days before his death. On the Jewish calendar that week, it was Passover, the biggest fundraiser of the Jewish year. Pilgrims have come from all over the Roman Empire, bringing their Roman coins stamped with images of their Roman gods to pay for travel. But you can't use those to pay for things in the temple. That's a graven image. It breaks the 2nd commandment. So you've got to exchange them – at a surcharge, of course. Then you've got to get an animal for the Passover sacrifice, and it has to be certified as unblemished because that's the rules. Much like the experience of buying a pop and a hotdog at a football game for ten bucks, religious pilgrims are a captive audience. They're going to pay for the sacrifice, monstrously overpriced as it is, because that's the price of good standing in the faith.

Jesus knows it, sees it – the fleecing of his people. Now scholars argue about how much of a scene Jesus actually caused here. When you're talking about tens of thousands of pilgrims and warehouses of animals, one guy turning over tables can only do so much, some say. Others, however, argue quite persuasively that Jesus was tolerated when he was just preaching out on the hillside, but when he starts messing with the money, that's when they decide to kill him. I could go either way. The more important question in my mind is: why does Matthew tell the story, and what about that answer explains why I am preaching on it for the first week of a stewardship campaign?

To begin to answer those questions, keep in mind that each of the gospel writers have a slant in their writing. Mark was first, and by far the shortest. He just wanted to get something down on paper quick. Luke is the gentile, John is the philosopher, but Matthew – Matthew is a good Jew writing to a community of Jewish Christians after the fall of the temple in 70 CE. In pointing out the contrast between a "house of prayer" and "a den of thieves" he's not merely referencing the dishonest trade going on in the temple. It's deeper than that. The prophet Jeremiah was the first to criticize people for turning God's Temple into a den of thieves, and he did so, not merely because of the extortion going on for the sacrifice, but because there was a belief at the time that regardless of how one acted or behaved outside the walls of the temple, a Jew would always be safe inside the walls. So you could

cheat your workers, lie to your neighbors, and then flee to the temple for safety. Jeremiah warns them that they've got it wrong – they'll be cast out, spewed out, ejected for failure to live by God's commands. God's house is no refuge from consequences. Matthew shows Jesus to be the fulfillment of Jeremiah's prophesy. He drives out those who have disassociated their behavior from their faith. He overturns business as usual. And he welcomes in those traditionally excluded and marginalized – the blind, the lame, the children. In so doing, Jesus became a steward and a herald of the dream. And what is the dream? That this might be a world where what we say with our mouths is lived out in our choices and our behavior. That this might be a world where human life is treasured and where everyone is welcome, healed, and respected. That this might be a world where voices long silenced are heard, where praises are sung, where prayer is valued over profits and property. In short, that the light will dawn and we will work in darkness no longer.

Jesus does more than overturn tables. He transforms that landscape of faith. He reforms the contours of our hearts. He informs the fears and fallacies of our thoughts.

You and I are called to be stewards of the dream. The mission statement of the United Methodist Church, at present is very simple: to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. Even apart because of social distancing, we are a part of something transformative – something seeking to remake the world after Jesus' vision for it.

So let me suggest two things that God needs to transform in our church today if we're going to be good stewards of God's dream in Saginaw. The first is our hearts. God will overturn tables of fear in order to empower us to live our faith boldly. These days, we fear a lot of things, and sometimes, we fear the wrong thing. We're afraid there's not enough. We're afraid of losing our loved ones. We're afraid of thinking differently about things in which we've invested a lot of time and energy because we're afraid that something we've believed or done may have been in vain. We're afraid of being wrong, and too often, we're also afraid of being right. We're afraid of trusting others. In the first letter of John 4:18, the writer notes that there is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment. Perfect love casts out fear. Just as Jesus drives out those buying and selling. Just as Jeremiah envisions the temple spewing out those whose professions of faith ring utterly hollow. The person who fears being punished for their kindness, that nice guys finish last, that loving work will be repaid with exploitation, unfair treatment, or manipulation is never fully able to let go and simply let the Spirit flow. It makes us wary and cynical. And it makes it hard to believe God is calling us to something bigger than anything we're doing or living in this moment.

Over and over again, when you hear stories of people who acted courageously – who faced down tanks or tormentors, who stood up for bullied classmates, who risked job or community standing or future prospects in order to take a stand for what's right – these people will tell you they were afraid. Courage is not the absence of fear, but the ability to act in spite of it. And so we act because our heart goes out to another in need, because we know we wouldn't be able to live with ourselves if we made the wrong choice, because we have to believe the world can be better and we can play a role in that.

So let me share a story that is still unfolding even now. Many of you know that I'm involved here in Saginaw in an organization called the Ezekiel Project. I go because it is the only organization I've encountered thus far that has enabled me to form relationships with African-American colleagues and East side congregations. Sadly, the United Methodist Church cannot do that for me. I need to stretch beyond my comfort zone. I need to interact with and understand people who are different than I am. Ezekiel Project gives me that opportunity. I hear about issues and events there that I never hear about from any other source, and these things challenge me, but they also grow me. After George Floyd's death last spring, there was a lot of talk about the need to work with the police, and to

address some of the disparities here in our community so that there would never be a George Floyd in Saginaw. As we gathered, one of our leaders asked if Ezekiel Project had the human resources and social capital in the community to spearhead the conversation. It got us looking at what we have, and as human nature often does, about what we didn't have. The conversation went downhill pretty quickly, and we pretty well abandoned the idea. But more recently, that same leader has come back to the group and admitted: I asked the wrong question. I led us in the wrong direction. Maybe God is calling us for such a time as this. Maybe we need to do it because it is hard. And maybe we won't have what we need until we step out in faith and trust God to give it. And we started talking about justice and our hopes for Saginaw, and what kind of city we want to live in together.

The church must learn this lesson. So many times, we look at the work, the energy required, the costs and the risks and the pitfalls. We will never transform the world if we aren't willing to take risks, and to act in spite of all the 'what ifs' that could throw up roadblocks to calling. We will never participate in the transformative work of God until we let God turnover the tables of fear and self-doubt, and transform our hearts with empathy and courage instead.

The second thing God will transform is our priorities. God will transform our priorities from money to mission. That's really what stewardship is about. Our budget is \$325,000 dollars or thereabouts. That budget is designed to maintain our building, pay our staff, fund our programs. Most of you today are hearing this message via livestream. Installing and maintaining that equipment and getting someone to run it all costs money. But our finance committee has been abundantly clear that we want to do more than just pay the bills. That's maintenance. We want to fund the dream. We want to be the body of Christ in this neighborhood, this city, our schools, our businesses. We want to do more than house good causes. We want to mobilize people to spread love and hope and the grace of another chance. But we can't do that unless we stop thinking about our gifts to the church as membership dues, and start thinking about them as fuel for the Spirit to move in us and through us. Maybe we need to let God overturn the money tables and the maintenance tables in our lives so that we can truly be free to understand ourselves as those with a mission to improve our world.

You and I are stewards of a dream. That's what gives us purpose and hope. In the 8th chapter of John's Gospel, Jesus says, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life." But in the 5th chapter of Matthew's gospel, Jesus says, "You are the light of the world. Let your light shine so that others will see the goodness of God." Both are true. Jesus may be THE light, but you and I carry it within us, too. As poor Lester pointed out, nobody can work in the dark. If we don't understand our role as stewards of the dream, carriers of the light, transformative agents for God's new world, we're might as well be groping in darkness. So I'm asking you to give. I'm asking you to give to the church off the top and not whatever's left over. I'm not asking you to give to support a cause or pay the bills, and I'm not asking you to give because you like me or you agree with everything the church is and does. That won't cut it, folks. I'm asking you to give because it's how you imitate Jesus. I'm asking you to give because you know we can't work in the dark. I'm asking you to give because you believe in the dream. I'm asking you to give because even apart, you want to be part of something transformative. I'm asking you to give as the ultimate challenge to do nothing less than change the world. May God make it so. Amen.