

Bring Our Wealth
Mark 10:17-31
First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)
October 28, 2018
Rev. Jill Cameron Michel

(Play stewardship video done by the youth)

You have heard the witness of some of our youth. They recognize what I hope all of us recognize and experience – that the ministry that we share here at First Christian does make a difference. It makes a difference for those of us who participate in it, and we continue to hope and believe that it makes a difference in the world.

And for many of us, this is a compelling enough reason to share of our wealth. When we find things that we believe in, when we are a part of communities that are making a difference and that, as Melea White said in the video we shared last week, share the same values that we have...then we want to be a part of those things. We want to support them in any way that we can from time and energy, to sharing information through social media, to giving money to support causes that matter to us.

For those of us who are a part of First Christian Church, this congregation and its mission and ministry are among those things that matters to us. And so, we hope that you will give generously both today and in the years to come.

And yet, our faith reminds us that while supporting our church and other causes that make a difference in the world is important, it is not only about furthering the mission of these organizations. While we are delighted to see our children grow in leadership...while we are excited to extend opportunities to people of all ages to serve in mission in our community and beyond...while we understand it to be important that we have significant conversations as we seek to grow more faithful...while worship inspires us and makes a difference in our

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week...while we are glad to have a building that we can share with many other groups...while all of these are good and important, the reality is that our offerings of money as well as time and talent are about so much more than supporting a good organization that makes a difference. They are acts of stewardship. And our acts of stewardship – of sharing what we have and of caring for the world and all that is in it – are about our relationship with God.

And we hear that clearly in today's scripture. A man comes up to Jesus. And we have no reason to believe he is anything but sincere. He comes and kneels before Jesus and asks about how he might inherit eternal life. And Jesus' answer begins with the commandments – particularly, we might note, the commandments that speak to how we related to other human beings. The man is, as you might imagine, pleased because he has spent his life as a faithful person who, while not perfect, *has* worked to keep the commandments.

But then Jesus continues on, “You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then, come, follow me.”¹

And the man's reaction is what most of ours would likely be. Mark tells us, “When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions.”²

Because even though keeping the commandments can be overwhelming, sometimes we can keep them at a distance in such a way that we can affirm them, even generally follow them, and still not have our lives disrupted. But, what Jesus reminds this man of is that our relationship with people, our relationship with the world, our relationship with power and wealth and prestige, all of these things cannot be separated from our relationship with God.

So, when Jesus starts talk about the man's wealth...about his stuff...then the conversation gets difficult.

¹ Mark 10:21, NRSV.

² Mark 10:22, NRSV.

And we understand this. Friends, the struggle is real. Not just for the person in the scripture, but for each of us.

And so, can we admit what we usually do with this text? We distract ourselves from its core message – and we are so good at it that we can do it all day long or even for a lifetime. We can talk about how rich *that* person was. We can wonder why that person asked the questions they asked. We can ask why Jesus gave the instruction he did and whether this instruction is only for *that* person or for all of us. We can point out that the person in question is a wealthy person and we can choose to compare ourselves to Bill Gates rather than the billions of people around the world who live in poverty, so that we don't have to consider ourselves wealthy. We can talk about the tithe – if we even dare talk about tithing – and whether the tithe is off our gross or net income, whether it applies only to our church giving or to the total of all our charitable giving.

We can talk about so many things and yet miss the core, the core of this text which is that our relationship with our stuff and with our wealth can, and so often does, get in the way of what matters. And sometimes we see that clearly. We've known situations where people, by their actions, put more value on their money than on other people. We've known situations where families were torn apart after the death of a loved one because of fights over how the estate was divided. We've known so many situations where we see it illustrated how money comes between people. But often we forget to ask questions about how money gets in the way of our relationship with God.

And we forget to remember that this doesn't only happen in big ways. The reality is that sometimes it's the more routine things. Often we get caught up in having the newest technology, having a bigger house, having another new outfit or a new purse for the season. We've lost the

idea that wealth and stuff are about utility and function, and we've come to a place where wealth and stuff are about prestige and impression and identity – where they are creating who we are. And so we buy and we purchase and we save and we hold on to, and we do all of these things in order to create an impression of who we are all the while, often, neglecting the needs of other people; often unlearning how to discern the difference between wants and needs; often destroying the world around us; often, even when we don't know it, taking advantage of the low wage worker or the overburdened land, in order that we can get a deal on the next thing that we want to purchase.

And, then, on top of that, there's how it impacts our relationship with God.

We tell ourselves that God isn't against a nice house or having choices of clothing. We tell ourselves that God wants us to have nice things, to be secure, to be rewarded for our faithfulness and our hard work. In fact, if we go to a more extreme point, there is a whole theology that some churches have embraced – the prosperity gospel – the idea that if we are good and if God approves of us, we will be rewarded with material things.

But, the real answer is that I don't know what God thinks about our stuff – and if we listen closely to scripture we might be disappointed to find out. I don't know how much God would say is too much – but I think it is less than we would hope. And so, I do think it is something we need to struggle with, something we need to ask ourselves. Most of us are a long way from having very little. If we are honest we, even the generous among us, will admit that we usually give out of our extra – we tend to give *after* we have paid for our nice house, bought our new car, gone on our vacations, eaten out with our friends, further filled our overfull closets.

Most of us don't even understand wealth as an obstacle. We don't consider how rates of suicide and anxiety are higher in countries with greater wealth. We don't question the amount of time and energy we put into protecting our stuff.

There are no easy answers here. And it seems that one of the challenges is that this story is not a blueprint...it isn't a list that we can go down and check off what we are doing right and fix what we are doing wrong. This text and the many others where Jesus and other Biblical characters address our relationship with wealth, don't make it that easy. This is work. This is deliberate work about the choices we make, about the steps that we take, day after day, year after year, to be better stewards of what we have.

And, if nothing else, it seems that Jesus is asking us to pause and to really be honest about the role our stuff plays in our lives. The reality is that we are going to live in relationship with stuff. We live in a world where we will rent an apartment or buy a home, where we will make purchases, and where we will inevitably have more than we need. But Jesus asks us to be honest about what that relationship is like...about if we have stuff or if our stuff has us...about when and how our accumulation gets in the way of loving God and loving neighbor.

And, friends, this is also about setting ourselves free. It is about using our resources to make the world better. It is about being thoughtful about what we purchase and how it impacts creation and other humans. It is also about the reality that when we consume less, when we buy less, when we realize that we need less...then we have more to share and more life to enjoy. When we set ourselves free from the control that our abundance has on us, we inevitably deepen our relationship with God and the world, and we open up space within us that allows God's light to shine through. May it be so.