

Acts 9: 1-6 (7-20)

Psalm 30

Revelation 5: 11-14

St. John 21: 1-19

Easter II 2022.

“After this Jesus revealed himself again to the disciples by the Sea of Tiberias; and he revealed himself in this way.”

St. John 21: 1

From the first day of the resurrection of Jesus Christ, people’s lives were then changed for ever... We are no longer the same. We are a “new creation,” St. Paul writes. We are invited to live in a new way, so that God’s priorities are established in every corner of our lives, and also, so his kingdom is built among us...

I’m very pleased that today we are starting a sermon series about “discipleship.” The Rev. Marie and I will be preaching and teaching about how to live, in light of what God has done for us through Jesus Christ...

Guess what? Once we chose our topics for each week, every single selection of Bible passages in our lectionary naturally fit with what we believe God has to communicate to us in the weeks ahead. The Rev. Marie and I haven’t changed the Bible readings, and we’re not twisting the readings to what we think the Bible *ought* to say. The message fits naturally with the appointed readings...

Today’s sermon topic on “discipleship” is one that often brings fear to the preacher, and anxiety to the congregation. Some preachers avoid it. I find it really puzzling why this is the case, because the Lord Jesus talked about it naturally, even when he was sometimes challenging to me... Today’s discipleship topic is... money!...

Why are many Christians hesitant to talk openly about money, God, and the Church?... I think the reason congregations can be uncomfortable is, frankly, most of us work pretty hard for the money we earn, and we suspect that if a preacher is talking about money, he or she might be trying to guilt us into giving more, and very understandably, we resist this. As well, many of us would like to be more generous to charities if we could, but heavens! We have bills to pay, other priorities, and only a limited income. So, even if we’d *like* to support our parish and other charities more, we feel we can’t... Also, for many of us, having money is linked with a sense of security – and who doesn’t want to feel secure?...

There’s one more reason why congregations might not like sermons about money from the start: We know that God created absolutely everything, including us; and we know in our *heads* that one glorious day, how much money we made will be irrelevant!... But we’re used to thinking of it as “our” money – and darn it! We worked hard for it!... Even if we admit it’s theologically true, it’s hard for us to agree that it’s ultimately God’s money, not ours, in the end...

So, I think there are very good reasons why congregations get uneasy with sermons about money!... Why are *preachers* sometimes anxious to preach about it?... I suspect it's because it seems a little self-serving... After all, frankly, I get regular deposits into my bank account as a result of your generosity. It's not a salary, actually, but a stipend: You meet my reasonable living expenses, so I get to do the best job in the world: To help us all to learn to love like Jesus Christ... Besides, preachers know that many of us in the pews give sacrificially, and we don't want to guilt people, any more than you want to be guilted...

So, let's put our minds to ease right at the start: I'm not going to ask you to give one penny more to St. Brice's, nor to any other charity. Not a single penny... In fact, if your income has been reduced lately, especially if this is causing you anxiety, I respectfully suggest that you might *reduce* your financial giving...

There are two aims this morning: The first aim is to see what values we carry about money. The second aim is to see what Jesus wants his friends to consider, as we live in light of his resurrection...

We all have attitudes about money, and most of us have been influenced by how money was treated, or misused, and the feelings about it, when we were growing up... Please allow me to tell a personal example: My mother paid the bills, because my father (when he was alive) was absolutely incompetent at keeping track of the family finances. Early in their marriage, about 1950, my father blew his entire pay for 2 weeks taking their parish youth group on a trip to Summerside, PEI. The teenagers had a wonderful day. My mother had a fit!... After that, my father got a weekly allowance... I remember my mother writing cheques to pay for the heating oil bill and stuff in the evenings, using our dining room table...

Another story which shaped me is when I was accepted to attend a theological college in England. It was an incredible opportunity, but the cost would be tens of thousands of Canadian dollars a year. At that time, my assets were my clothes, a bookcase of books, and a ten-speed bicycle. You might as well have asked me to pay for a flight to the moon!... I remember telling my mother the problem, and she got very quiet for a minute. Then she said, "Peter, I don't know how we'll ever do this. But if this is God's will, God provides. We will find a way." She was unconsciously sharing her own values about money – that if God is being honoured, the resources somehow will be uncovered. (In the end, I ended up in a theological college in Toronto, where I met my wife Nancy – for which I'm very grateful that God had a different plan...)

I know we need to keep our physical distance during the pandemic, and we need to wear our masks. You can move about if you like. I'd like to turn to one person next to you, and tell a story about money from when you were growing up. Then listen to the story from the other person... Did you have an allowance? Did you remember what it was?

Did there seem to be enough, or never enough? Did you hear your parents fighting or crying about bills? Did you feel taken care of financially, or not? Did you get new clothes at Christmas, or used clothes? Please tell a story – any story you like – about money, from when you were growing up... You have 5 minutes in total...

Time to gather together again... We all have stories to tell, as well as the gospel to hear. There is nothing to be proud of about money, and there's nothing to be ashamed about either. It's just a tool we all use in life. But we all realize that we have attachments and values about money, and we can sometimes carry them close to our heart...

The Lord Jesus came to bring good news of God's kingdom – and it is good news!... What did Jesus have to say about money to his friends? I suggest he has the same message for you and for me...

Throughout scripture, and throughout the tradition of the Church, there is one caution, and 3 positive values associated with money. One caution; 3 positive values...

The caution is this: Any of us can risk developing unhealthy attachments in our lives. Left unchecked, unhealthy attachments can become idols... Many of us are blessed to have marriage partners or deep friendships, but if these become the ultimates in our lives, then Jesus warns us that even these can become unhealthy attachments. Another example is money. Yet other examples of unhealthy attachments can be the pursuit of sex in itself, or our jobs (if we enjoy our jobs), recreational drugs or alcohol, and so on... Some of these can be good things in themselves, but when we develop an unhealthy attachment to them, then we risk allowing them to become idols – small-g god substitutes...

The classical Christian name for this form of attachment is a sin called “avarice.” “Avarice” – a single-minded pursuit to acquire wealth at the expense of our human relationships and our walk with the Lord...

Here are 3 examples, when the Lord Jesus warned about having an unhealthy attachment to money. First, the Lord Jesus told a parable about a successful farmer who was spiritually poor:

Then [Jesus] told them a parable: ‘The land of a rich man produced abundantly. And he thought to himself, “What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?” Then he said, “I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul, Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.” But God said to him, “You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?” So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich towards God.’ (Luke 12: 16-21)

This parable is a caution, isn't it? – against cherishing material things above eternal priorities...

A second example is when a wealthy young man wants to become a disciple of Jesus. We read that he is a decent, moral young man, obedient to his parents, and so on... But his wealth is an insurmountable obstacle to living a kingdom-life. Mark 10: 17 begins:

As [Jesus] was setting out on a journey, a man ran up and knelt before him, and asked him, 'Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?...' Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said, '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.' When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions.

Here is an unhealthy attachment: The young man couldn't give up his stuff... We might think that everyone wants the gospel deep down. But even in the presence of the Son of Man, this rich young man couldn't do it! – and Jesus let him go... Sometimes we need to let people go...

A third example is from Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, that magnificent teaching event:

'No one can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth. (Matthew 6: 24)

Has money become our master?... If so, then we can't serve God... So, we see the overall caution is against having an unhealthy attachment to money...

I Timothy 6: 10: "For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, and in their eagerness to be rich some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pains."

If we suspect that money has a hold of us, rather than our having a hold on our money, then we become free by giving money away generously. That breaks its power over us...

That is the single caution to us about money... Positively, God commends generosity. It's not about the *amount* of money. It's the attitude of generosity as we share it. Mark 6: 41 begins,

[Jesus] sat down opposite the treasury, and watched the crowd putting money into the treasury. Many rich people put in large sums. A poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which are worth a penny. Then he called his disciples and said to them, 'Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who

are contributing to the treasury. For all of them have contributed out of their abundance; but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on.'

The Lord didn't get excited about the wealthy people who put in huge sums. He was impressed by the generous heart of the poor widow. It's the heart, not the value, which matters most...

Positively, we are invited to be generous...

As for those who in the present age are rich, command them not to... set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but rather on God who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. [Those with resources] are to do good, to be rich in good works, generous, and ready to share, thus storing up for themselves the treasure of a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of the life that really is life. (I Timothy 6: 17-19)

[...] I have given you an example that by such work we must support the weak, remembering the words of the Lord Jesus, for he himself said, "It is more blessed to give than to receive." ' (Acts 20: 35)

Money is not a negative, but a positive: We can use money to bless others. Especially, we're invited to consider those in need... St. Brice's lives this out as we support our teenage girl through "Children Believe," support Madagascar Missions and the orphanage, the Crisis Centre and the Transition House here in North Bay, and so on...

Positives: Generosity. Care for those in need. Here is the other positive, but it can sometimes seem a little scary: There is a link between "sharing" and "blessings..." We often think that by holding on to what we have, then we've got blessings. In fact, the blessings come when we share:

Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. And God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that by always having enough of everything, you may share abundantly in every good work. (II Corinthians 9: 7-8)

If you doubt me, then I invite you to do a little experiment: Try sharing, and then actively look to see if you get a blessing in return. I am absolutely confident the blessing will be there, when we have eyes to see...

So we see we all carry values and attachments to money. God wants the very best for every aspect of our lives – including our financial well-being. If we feel a little scared, we aren't alone.

(Remember, the “eye of the needle” was a short gate in the Jerusalem wall. Everyone could pass through the gate, but not while carrying a bunch of stuff.)

Then Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, ‘How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!’ And the disciples were perplexed at these words. But Jesus said to them again, ‘Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.’ They were greatly astounded and said to one another, ‘Then who can be saved?’ Jesus looked at them and said, ‘For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible.’
(Mark 10: 23-27)

Let’s guard against an unhealthy attachment to money. Positively, let’s celebrate how money can be a gift when we have generous hearts – not only to others, but to ourselves, by using money in beautiful ways...

As you leave, there’ll be a handout today, with a brief summary of some good practices, especially if we struggle in this area, and a summary of where St. Brice’s stands. In all things, let’s live joyfully in light of the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Amen!