

“The Power of Money”
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Hickory Neck Episcopal Church – Toano, Virginia
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St. Francis Day (observed)
Amos 6:1-7; I Timothy 6:11-19; Luke 16:19-31

Around this time each year, we gather to celebrate the life and witness of one of our most celebrated saints, Francis of Assisi. We commemorate his love for God’s creation by blessing animals, and we remember Francis as a meek, gentle, generous exemplar of what’s best about our Christian faith.

Yet we tend to forget some of the less appealing facets of his character. Francis grew up the son of a prosperous merchant, the heir apparent to the family business, but he seemed distracted as a youth and somewhat tepid about his future as a trader. Having received a summons from God through prayer to “rebuild my Church,” Francis immediately set to work literally rebuilding a dilapidated chapel not far from where he lived. And though that effort was noble, it wasn’t exactly what God had in mind. Francis gradually discovered that the rebuilding job God had in mind was more about people than places, and from that point forward, Francis began behaving in ways that increasingly disturbed his family.

At one point, they decided he had gone insane, or perhaps had been possessed by demons, so they locked him in the cellar until the local bishop could arrive to straighten things out. And on that fateful day, in the village commons, in front of his family and anyone else who cared to watch, Francis declared his marriage to Lady Poverty, stripped off all his clothes, and walked into the forest stark naked, leaving behind all his possessions, his family and friends, and a lucrative trading career.

He lived the rest of his days as a mendicant monk, one who wandered around preaching the Gospel in ways that people could better understand. He gathered a group of followers, attracted to his way of life, and in order to help them better realize what it meant to follow Christ in this radical way, Francis could often be quite harsh with them. Yet despite all his faults and idiosyncrasies, Francis managed to transform the Church and make it stronger, during a period that was rife with corruption, cynicism, and theological controversy.

Few are called to live his life of radical poverty, which comes as a relief to us gathered here. However, Francis did make a powerful witness to how we are meant to live in relation to money, and that witness remains relevant for us today.

You see, money is a powerful force in our lives. Many of us work most of our waking hours earning it, and much of what remains of our time we use figuring out how best to spend or invest what comes our way. Some worry about whether there will be enough to meet basic needs. Others strive to save for future events like college for children and retirement for ourselves. Some of us are already there, bearing the burden of ever increasing tuition payments or watching our carefully invested savings dwindle in what were supposed to be the golden years.

Yes, money is a powerful force in our lives, and if you doubt that, just try to remember the last time you went an entire day without seeing a dollar sign on an electric bill or a banking statement or the television or on a credit card receipt or a cash register display. When's the last time you went an entire day without touching a piece of currency, or stroking a check, or a swiping a piece of plastic? It's everywhere, and so when we come here, to Church, to worship God, the last thing we want to deal with is

money. Talking openly and honestly about money is taboo for many, and especially in this place, where we're supposed to feel safe and be comforted; a place where we hope to escape, or perhaps to transcend, such mundane things.

But the Bible recognizes our obsession with money, and subsequently expounds expansively on the matter. Jesus refers to money as much or more than any other single subject in the Gospels: the parable of the talents, the woman who searched for that one lost silver coin until she found it, the admonition that it's easier to get a camel through the eye of a needle than a rich man into the kingdom of God. Multiple times Jesus says something along the lines of, "Sell all you have, give to the poor, take up your cross, and follow me." In the Gospel of Mark, Jesus points out the widow making a Temple offering of two tiny slivers of copper, comparing her favorably to the wealthy who offered larger amounts, but lesser offerings relative to their resources.

I could keep going. However, I hope the point is already made. Money gets talked about in the Bible all the time, but we treat money talk in Church as taboo. Why? Isn't the Bible the primary authority for our faith and practice? The Bible talks about money all the time. Are we ashamed, are we embarrassed that compared to others we either have too little or too much?

The truth is that God loves all of us, rich and poor and everyone in between. In fact, I don't even believe God cares how much money we have. Instead, God seems concerned about three issues: 1. How do we get our money? 2. What do we do with our money? 3. What does our money do to us? God cares about these three issues, because each of them can impact the loving relationships we need to have with God and our neighbors.

The first issue, “How do we get our money?” surfaces in the prophet Amos. Today we heard a scathing indictment of the rich. “Alas for those who lie on beds of ivory, and lounge on their couches, and eat lambs from the flock, and calves from the stall.” That single verse describes a life of luxury lived by a precious few. But were they being condemned simply because they were wealthy? It doesn’t seem that way when we look at the preceding chapter.

“Ah, you that turn justice to wormwood, and bring righteousness to the ground! They hate the one who reproves in the gate, and they abhor the one speaks the truth. Therefore because you trample on the poor and take from them levies of grain, you have built houses of hewn stone, but you shall not live in them; you have planted pleasant vineyards, but you shall not drink their wine. For I know how many of your transgressions, and how great are your sins – you who afflict the righteous, who take a bribe, and push aside the needy in the gate.” [5:7, 10-12]

Those references to “the gate” are talking about city gates, where law courts often convened. People were buying justice; judges were being bribed. The poor, who didn’t have the money to keep up, were losing their cases – and subsequently their meager assets. The wealthy of Israel, at least some of them, were building up their coffers on the ill-gotten gain squeezed from the poor. Their condemnation in Amos stems not from their wealth, but from their dishonest means of getting rich.

How do we get our money? It seems to matter to God, so it should matter to us. Sometimes we get so caught up in getting the stuff, that we suffer lapses of judgment. We look only at the bottom line and casually ignore the moral dimension to investing and our everyday business practices. However much money we have, how we get it is important,

because we cannot presume that God's passion for justice has been quenched since the time of Amos.

Second, what do we do with our money? Nobody likes to answer that question. It's so personal, but it's also key, because what we do with our money reveals what we truly value in life. What we do with our money reveals how we feel about ourselves, and what we hope the world will think about us.

Problem is, the One person we might want to keep most in the dark is the same One who sheds the most light on the subject. Every Sunday, our worship begins, with the same prayer "Almighty God, to you all hearts are open, all desires known, and from you no secrets are hid." None of us can fool God. God knows how we spend our money and why. Are we using the resources God has given us rightly, or do we use them foolishly to compensate for something that's missing deep down inside? Could that something missing be a living, loving relationship with God? What do we do with our money, and why? Take that up with God in prayer, and you may discover fresh values, new priorities.

"As for those who in the present age are rich," wrote the Apostle Paul to Timothy, "command them not to be haughty, or to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but rather on God who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. They 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."

The third question I posed earlier has to do with what our money does to us. That may seem like a silly question to some people. After all, money doesn't do anything to us. We might do things *with* money, or money might do things *for* us, but money doesn't

do anything *to* us. Oh, but if that could only be true. Money is a powerful force in our lives, and it can do things to us. It can change us.

We've already seen in Amos how money can make people arrogant. Those folks singing songs and eating lamb on their ivory divans were completely confident in their ability to take care of themselves. They thought they no longer needed God's help, but we know history and how Amos' prophesy was fulfilled.

Money can also distract us from the needs of other people. We heard today a story from Luke, Lazarus and the rich man. We all know the story well. A poor man lives by the gate, hungry and sick and totally ignored by the wealthy man safely tucked away in his enclave. Both die. We know where they go, and when the rich man asks for mercy, he learns a hard lesson of cosmic commerce. "Lazarus couldn't come help you, even if he wanted to."

The rich man, accustomed to hard bargaining, tries to leverage a little assistance for his living brothers, but the retort comes back, "Why would they believe Jacob Marley, if they disregarded Moses and the prophets?" In other words, give it up, rich dude. Your brothers are just like you were, too caught up in getting money and using money to get what they want to pay attention to the really important things in life, "the life that really is life," to borrow a phrase from our friend St. Paul. When it comes to eternal life, they get the same chance as everybody else, no advantages to be sought or purchased, and in this realm your prestige and power is meaningless.

Money made the rich man callous. He had to know that Lazarus was out there. He even knew the man's name, once he needed him for something. But the rich man did nothing to relieve his suffering. Money crippled the rich man. It made him too tough and

callous to feel pity. And that's the power money has over people. Money can even skew our perceptions of reality. It can make us feel perpetually poor. No matter how much we've got, it's not enough, like some kind of addiction.

That's why Paul writes in his letter to Timothy, "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." Self-inflicted pains caused by sacrifices made upon the altar of mammon: sacrifices of sanity and sanctity for the sake of status and security. Those pains have made many people hard and callous, insensitive to the needs of others. The danger of such insensitivity is that we can become unaware of when we're hurting ourselves the most.

Money is a powerful force in our lives. It's not a bad thing. Money can do a world of good. Yesterday at the Fall Festival, we raised a lot of money that's going to do a lot of good for a lot of people in our community. But like most good things, money can come to be used for evil purposes and take on a life of its own, and where we find wise guidance is the scripture, and in the example of St. Francis, both of which commend us to be grateful for what we receive and share what we can with those who need it most.

Amen.