

To Name and To Wrestle

September 22, 2024

Introduction

As I begin my reflections here today, I beg your pardon. As many of you read in your This Week at Union email this week, I damaged some ligaments in my hand and am not only in a world of pain, I can't type!

Today was supposed to be the day my sermon kicked off our 2025 pledge drive with the theme, "Because of you, Union changes lives." Our church financial picture is stable but in need. Our goal this year is to increase pledging by \$75,000, and so, the plan was to both lay that out and hope to inspire you with the ways our church changes lives.

But, the fact that merely getting this last paragraph on paper was excruciating and took four times longer than normal, I am going to pivot. Instead of a rousing look at how our church changes lives, I've pulled a sermon out of my archives from the first year that I was here. It's also a stewardship sermon, just from a different direction.

I'll be honest, if I could, I'd be crossing my fingers that my injury doesn't hamstring the church's fundraising efforts this fall. But I'm a woman of faith, so while I'll work on this pledge campaign, I'll also trust in God's ways and this congregation.

To Name

It's human nature to avoid that which makes us uncomfortable. We've all heard that old axiom – don't talk about religion and politics. I'm an NPR addict who for decades avoided Marketplace Money because listening to people talk about what I had so little of was just too uncomfortable.

Jacob wrestling with God is such a powerful story to me. It can call to mind for us all of the difficult things that we wrestle with. Like the stranger that Jacob wrestles with who Jacob only realizes is God when he looks back on the situation, often, these uncomfortable things that we wrestle with have the power to bless us once we are in right relationship to them.

I've been preaching that spirituality for years in many aspects of life, but today I'd like us to think about it in regard to money. Money is something that I've wrestled with, that many of us do, and that we will continue to wrestle with until we are in right relationship with it. I'm not alone – the majority of divorces are rooted in financial issues, and bankruptcies and foreclosures (even though they're a constitutional right) are fraught with shame.

Jesus talks about money and poverty more than any other topic, including love or forgiveness!

Anne Lamott wrote, "I have worked for twenty years on getting over some of my fear and shame about money, and what has that gotten me? A letter from the IRS."

Wrestling

Do you remember the scripture verse, “Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also?” How churches wrestle with money was part of a conference several of our church leaders participated in a few years ago through the Center on Philanthropy at Indiana University and the UCC. One of my take-aways was to understand that in order to inspire lives of gratitude and generosity, the church needs to help people wrestle with, and come to a healthier relationship with money.

Who likes to hear money sermons? Who is wishing that they had stayed home to watch the pregame shows? Encouraging a healthier relationship with money will, at the very least, result in better personal and household health. And, it may help our congregation to be in a healthier place financially, which will allow us to achieve more of our mission of making the Christ Spirit dominant.

In the course about inspiring generosity, there was a particularly interesting litany about why lay people don’t like hearing about money in church and why clergy don’t like talking about it. I’d like to share it with you today as a call and response. I’ll name one of the common reasons church members and clergy don’t like talking about and hearing about money. Then when I say, “and therefore,” you’re invited to respond, “we avoid talk about money.”

- In our consumer-oriented society, many confuse their self-worth with their financial worth and therefore, we avoid talk about money.
- The average middle class church member is struggling to balance their income with the bills they must pay; they feel they can’t give more, and therefore... we avoid talk about money.
- People on fixed incomes wonder if they will have sufficient resources to see them through to a good death, and therefore...we avoid talk about money.
- Some feel shame as to how little they give. For them, money talk results in guilt, and therefore...we avoid talk about money.
- People of means are often overwhelmed by the many requests they receive and fear that they are being exploited, and therefore...we avoid talk about money.
- Younger people are not interested in funding bureaucracies and frequently view church talk about money as a way to keep a bureaucracy afloat, and therefore...we avoid talk about money.
- Self-made individuals can sometimes resent people telling them what to do with their money, and therefore...we avoid talk about money.
- Money talk creates anxiety; people do not want to talk about their anxieties out of fear that they will be blamed or judged for their fears, and therefore...we avoid talk about money.

Why do clergy see money talk as taboo?

- Clergy do not find satisfaction in dealing with financial matters, and therefore... we avoid talk about money.

- Clergy do not see financial stewardship as a meaningful measure of congregational vitality and spiritual wellness and therefore... we avoid talk about money.
- Clergy fear that talk about money will alienate members, and cause some to leave the church, and therefore... we avoid talk about money.
- Clergy fear that, when talking about money in the context of raising it for the church, members will interpret them as publicly asking for a raise or doing this for their own benefit and therefore... we avoid talk about money.
- Clergy have not been trained as money managers or business administrators and therefore... we avoid talk about money.
- Many clergy are personally struggling to financially make ends meet themselves, and therefore... we avoid talk about money.
- Clergy fear offending people if they ask incorrectly or too often and therefore... we avoid talk about money.
- Clergy fear that if people do give big gifts they or the church will be beholden to the giver, and therefore... we avoid talk about money.

Did you notice that the majority of those reasons people list are rooted in fear or misperception? Isn't that the case for most of the things that we wrestle with? But our scripture tells us that wrestling with something, especially something we've been avoiding, can have powerful, lasting outcomes.

And so, a few steps toward a healthy relationship with money that come to mind are: Name it! Naming something in the Old Testament implies power over it. Name and acknowledge what it is that you're fearing, what it is that you're avoiding.

I have a tool called a "Financial Autobiography" that I sometimes give to couples who come to me for premarital counseling. Naming your relationship with money, and understanding your partner's, can be huge.

Second is assessing our standard of living. Looking at our financial choices is a key step in developing a healthier relationship with money. I had a colleague who kept notebooks for 35 years. The first notebook, from 1975, had a price tag on it of \$0.59. The last cost him \$18.99 in 2010.

He used this example to talk about how prices have changed and to encourage people to increase their giving to the church. But what he didn't point out is that the first one was a spiral-bound notebook and the last one was a Moleskine.

Assessing our standard of living is something important for all of our households, as well as for the church. The last strategy I'll lift up today as a means of starting to wrestle with our relationship with money is to begin with the end in mind. Ask yourself what you would like your generosity budget to be, what proportion of your budget do you want to be able to do good with? Then make a plan to get there.

This will take time, but step by step is how all journeys, including the journey to generosity, happen. This idea of moving step-by-step toward increasing generosity is why, in the mailing you'll receive this week about our annual pledge campaign, there's a chart that shows you what different percentages of giving would look like. Step by step, increment by increment, we can get there.

Conclusion

Talk about money is a faith conversation because it affects our lives individually and as households, it affects how our church is able to do our work of building the reign of God. In this, we can learn so much from Jacob wrestling with God. Jacob had behaved less than admirably in the passages before the one we read today, nonetheless God ambushed his life with a chance to be different. God slipped away from Jacob at daybreak, but never abandoned Jacob and never abandons us.

After wrestling with God, Jacob is vulnerable, and, as it turns out, that vulnerability becomes a grace in the next passage as he reunites with his brother Esau. This can remind us that it is often in our vulnerability that we become humble enough to approach our relationships in new ways. God is ambushing our lives with a chance to be different. It may be through our vulnerability that we will be humble enough to approach our relationship with money and generosity in new ways. No matter what, God will be with us through this struggle and beyond.

Friends, you may not have a contentious relationship with money, but many do. I invite you to join me in wrestling with that relationship as a matter of faith. Like Jacob's story, we may walk away with a limp, but we will walk away blessed and better equipped to be God's hands and feet on this earth. Let's all pray that it may be so. Alleluia and Amen.

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Genesis 32:22-32; James 3:13-4:3, 7-8a