

WGUMC February 12, 2017
Matthew 6:1-4; 19-21; 24-34

"Don't Follow the Money"

I never fully appreciated the comic strip "Dilbert" until I moved to Silicon Valley. As a pastor, I didn't know much about the competitive, cubicled life of your typical tech worker here, but now I do. In a strip that appeared a few years after the dot.com collapse, Dogbert is talking to Bob the Dinosaur, "Bob," he says, "remember that money can't buy happiness...But it can buy expensive possessions that make other people envious, and that feels just as good...And you can pay to have people whacked." Bob the Dinosaur, with his small reptilian brain, says, "Can I trade my happiness for some money?" [Scott Adams, September 20, 2003]

We all know of people in this Valley who have traded happiness for money. But why does it have to be a trade? Why can't we have both at the same time? This is not just a hi-tech question. It's an age-old problem, and so Jesus devotes a good portion of his Sermon on the Mount to the subject of money.

And though we have seen enormous changes in our world in just the last ten or twenty years, let alone the last two thousand years, we are as ambivalent about money now as the followers of Jesus were back then.

There is something about money that makes us uneasy and keeps us on edge. When the subject comes up, our defenses go up. It causes us so much shame and embarrassment that we'd almost rather talk about what goes on in our bedroom than what's in our bank accounts.

Whenever a topic stirs up this much angst in us, we know that we are getting very close to what matters most to us and it's not God. Jesus knows this, which is why he tries to warn us that we cannot serve two masters. We cannot serve both God and wealth because on a fundamental level, they are polar opposites.

First, let's take a look at money. The more money we have, the more possessions we can buy, the more people we

can influence, and the more power we think we have. Money is about power, and ever since Adam bit the apple in the Garden of Eden, we've been on a quest for power.

Money makes us think that we can own things and people. We use it to impress our neighbors and coworkers, placate our spouses, and bribe our children. Money also makes us think that we can control things. If we have enough money, we can buy a good education, we can buy insurance, and we can pay into a pension, and then we will have it made. But all it takes is a divorce, a diagnosis, or a death to prove that money is not nearly as powerful as it seems.

Now let's take a look at God. The Psalms say that all power belongs to God. [Psalm 62:11] But the way God works is so very different from the way money works. The best way I can put it is that money leads to ownership whereas God leads to relationship. Money seeks to be in control. God seeks to be in love. Do you see the difference?

Our bank gives us money to buy a house. But that doesn't mean that the loan officer has a relationship with us. The bank still owns the house and won't hesitate to kick us out if we can't make the payments. In fact, relationships just complicate the business of ownership.

By contrast, God freely gives us everything we need and then sets us free. God doesn't seek to control us but to love us. And God won't foreclose on that love even when we take our life and run with it and fail to make any payments on God's gift.

That's the big difference between ownership and relationship. When we're talking about money, there is a thing called risk management and there comes a point at which there is no more forgiveness; in the end, the debt must be paid. But with God, it is different. God is not about minimizing risk. In Christ, God maximizes risk. In Christ, God becomes vulnerable and exposes himself to us. Rather than charge service fees; God makes sacrifices. Christ on the cross says that God is the

Master who comes to serve. But money is the servant that wants to become our master. God is the power of love. Money fuels the love of power. We are talking about two entirely different worlds here, and Jesus says that we can't live in both of them at the same time, at least not in the same way.

Now we have the blessing and the challenge of living in San Jose, one of the most affluent places in the USA. I would imagine that most of us feel as if we spend a lot more time serving money than we do serving God. We don't like it, but it's what we have to do to survive here. We live in a world that is awash in wealth which is precisely why the words of Jesus are so needed here.

The Sermon on the Mount gives us good guidelines for being in right relationship with money. Note that the first thing Jesus has to say in this sermon about money is how to give it away. It goes back to the ancient idea of offering God the first fruits of our labors in order to acknowledge that it all comes

from God anyway. We don't own it, and giving some of it away right away helps us make sure that it doesn't own us.

But Jesus says that we should do this giving in secret. This is the only way to give money without damaging or destroying a relationship. You can have the best of intentions, but when you give someone money, you are making them indebted to you. The more public the gift, the more they are controlled by you. No matter how freely and innocently you give, somehow the money will stand between the two of you.

Political donors know this and exploit it. They don't want us to know whom they are giving money to, but they sure want the recipient to know. They want that politician to be indebted to them, because they want favors from them. And the same thing happens in families, too. Parents and grandparents have been known to turn Christmas into a competition and gift-giving into a power game. They think they are serving the interests of their children when they are only serving

themselves. The only way to win this game is to end it by figuring out how to do your giving in secret, "and your Father who sees in secret will reward you."

So the first thing we need to do with money is to give some of it away. And the second thing we need to do is be sure that we aren't hoarding the rest of it away. Jesus says, "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth...but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven...." And we hear these words and assume they are for the Bill Gates and Warren Buffets of the world. But remember that Jesus wasn't preaching to rich people but to poor and average folk who were desperately wanting to be rich. They didn't have money to store, but they were still putting their store in money. They were going after earthly treasures, but he offered them spiritual ones, instead. If he gave them riches, they would trust in their riches. But he gave them grace so they could learn to trust in God.

Rich or poor, we have to learn to trust in God. So no matter how much money we have, let's give God thanks that it isn't quite enough or it isn't anywhere near enough to fool us into thinking that we are in control of our lives. For if any of us had enough money to make us feel secure in this life then our soul would surely be in trouble for the next one. As Jesus says, where our treasure is now, that's where our heart will be forever.

The lesson here is: DON'T follow the money. If we do, we will only end up in a world of worry. But if we give some of our money away and manage not to put our trust in what we have left, then we will learn not to worry about our life.

I've worried a lot in my life and so these these verses are some of my favorites in all of Scripture. I like how Jesus uses images from nature to teach us about human nature. Look at the birds, he says. Look at the flowers. They have no money. They have no ownership of anything, yet they are in right

relationship with everything. They are utterly dependent on their environment. They have no control over not it. They are part of God's good Creation and they trust it. And so can we.

I don't know about you, but I am never so happy as when I leave the world of money and get out into the world of nature. Just getting out of the Valley, away from internet and TV, out of earshot of the freeway, I start to calm down. Then I look around, and I see birds and flowers and trees and am reminded that the natural world doesn't worry.

We can get that same stress relief by going on retreat. The retreat centers I've been to are not plush. The rooms offer very little—a bed, a desk, a window—but while I'm there, I never need to worry about what I will eat or what I will drink or what I will wear. In the world of money, we worry about all these things. But when we go on retreat, we can strive first for the kingdom of God. We can forget about what we own and focus instead on what God has done. And before we leave, we

can say a prayer or two or three and ask God to help us take that perspective home.

Do you think you might need a retreat? Do you wonder how you could ever get away? You don't have to go away. My hope, my prayer is that every time you come to this church, it will feel like a mini-retreat. You just have to imagine yourself stepping from the world of money and into the world of God's grace. To everyone whose spirit struggles to survive in Silicon Valley, I say, "Come meet the Master we serve. Come share in the treasure we have. Come find your heaven on earth. Come here. Come home."