

## Money and Maybe

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“[A]nd money meets every need.” -- Ecclesiastes 10:19

As you know, I've been preaching a series of sermons for the past few months on topics you suggested to me. This morning, I want to speak about money and our church's need for it. It will probably come as no surprise that none of you suggested I preach on that topic. But I'm going to anyway.

We have to, you see – we preachers – because you folks out there in Pewville need an annual reminder that while churches do not live on bread alone, we also do not live simply on the power of prayer. No one does. It is certainly true, as the liturgist reminds us every Sunday in the call to giving, that God does provide, but it's equally true and a great deal more obvious to most people that God provides through us, and our annual stewardship campaign is that season when we talk about money without flinching.

Now, those of you who have read the title of this morning's sermon, “Money and Maybe,” may be thinking that what I mean by it is that a stewardship sermon is when I talk about money and you think about giving it, maybe. Well, my sermon, I hope, is a bit deeper than that.

I took my title from the two lessons that bookend our Scripture readings for the morning. The first is from that mordant observer of life who left us the book of Ecclesiastes in the Old Testament. Tradition says that it was Solomon, who, according to the rabbis, wrote the book of Ecclesiastes when he was old and disillusioned and full of the knowledge of how the world really works. And if Solomon did make the observation that “Money answers every need,” he perhaps came closer to the truth than he realized.

“Money answers every need” is a pretty blunt statement about money, and for a certain type of person, it's not only blunt but it's also true: money does meet their every need.

For the folks we would consider rank materialists, money is pretty much the answer for everything, devoted as such folks are to creature comforts. These are the sorts of folks Paul speaks of in Philippians when he says their god is the belly, and in Romans he says that such folks don't serve Jesus Christ, they serve their own belly. We know from our own observations that they also serve their own sculpted abs and perfect teeth and permanent tans. These are the folks who say, with that farmer in our gospel reading from Luke, Eat, drink, and be merry. When it comes to life, what you see is what you get, and people who are identified by their culture as consumers – that would be us, according to the nightly business report – want to make sure that everyone sees what they got: platinum educations, good jobs, and Cadillac health care plans.

And all of that takes money, and the writer of Ecclesiastes knew that and said so, and it's a refreshing moment in the Bible for someone to say flat-out that money matters and matters a great deal, not only to materialists, but also to those of us trying to live spiritual lives in a material world. Money matters a great deal to us, as well. We live in a cash economy, and as much as we'd like to be able to keep Faith going on the power of prayer, it also takes cash to keep the lights on, our missions funded, and the staff paid. Those are some simple facts about churches and money, and it behooves us as we enter

our stewardship season to be candid and generous in our thinking about those intertwined realities.

That's the money part of this morning's sermon title. Money matters. Now about the maybe.

Jesus's parable about the successful farmer – or “the Rich Fool” as some Bibles call him – is found only in Luke's Gospel, even though Jesus often speaks about wealth in the first three gospels. It's launched by a request from an anonymous voice in the crowd, “Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me,” which is a reasonable enough request for someone who's acquired a reputation for his sound teaching, as Jesus had.

But Jesus refuses, and instead, in verse 15, he issues a warning against “all kinds of greed,” suggesting that there are different kinds of greed, some of which may involve unearned wealth – such as a family inheritance – and others of which may involve attempting to make ourselves secure against an uncertain future. Isn't that what the farmer did in Jesus's story – attempt, through his own efforts and good fortune, to secure his future? Let's look at that story again.

The farmer has done nothing obviously wrong. His land, Jesus says, produced abundantly, so abundantly that he ran out of places to store his abundance. What would be the sensible thing to do in that situation? Build bigger storage places, of course, and that's what he did. And having done so, he assesses his situation and realizes that he has enough material wealth to last him for many years. So he says to himself, Relax, take it easy, put your feet up, enjoy your golden years, you've done good.

Aren't all the financial planners telling us today to do exactly what that farmer did – to make sure we're saving enough to provide for our retirement years? Isn't that what Professor Daniel Gilbert of Harvard urges us to do, in those Prudential commercials that are such cute and clever and gentle warnings that it takes a lot more money than we think to make it through old age?

And why shouldn't we take, as it were, a prudential attitude toward our post-earning years? The alternative to sound financial planning now is geriatric impoverishment then, and becoming a burden on our families or the families of others who pay for our cultural safety net. Most of us dread the thought of being a burden on others, and so we make provision now for the day when our capacity to make such provision for ourselves will be past. What's wrong with that?

Nothing per se, except that it betrays a perspective that's a mild form of the materialist perspective we read about in Ecclesiastes: “And money meets every need.” What happens when you run out, not of money, but of need? Isn't that what happened to that successful farmer? “You fool,” the text says, “this very night your life is being demanded of you.” In other words, this very night, you're going to run out of need. You'll have no more need for the wealth you've so carefully stored away for the future. And then whose will it be? You've tried to make secure with material realities what is fundamentally a spiritual reality, which is your life. There's the problem, Jesus says, trying to secure the spiritual with the material. Ultimately, he says, it doesn't work.

Maybe you'll live to a ripe old age and maybe you won't. Maybe the roof of your house will fall in and maybe it won't. Maybe your business will succeed and maybe it won't. Maybe your kids will be sensible and responsible with the inheritance you leave them and maybe they won't be. Maybe folks will step up in this year's stewardship campaign and eliminate Faith's deficit, and maybe they won't.

Money has lots of maybe aspects to it, but when we ask you to pledge your support for Faith church for the coming year, we're not asking you to invest in a harebrained, get-rich-quick scheme that's full of maybes. We're asking you to invest in an institution that

is unique in its mission and purpose. Nowhere in the world except the Christian church will you find a group of people dedicated to the gospel of Jesus Christ. Nowhere except in the church will you find a viable alternative to the materialistic bitterness and strife and chaos that is threatening to engulf our community, our government, and whole nations. Nowhere except in the church will you find an outpost of that alternative reality Jesus called the realm of God, where everyone has enough, where we look not to our own interests but to the interests of others, where the voices of the powerless and marginalized are lifted up, and where the broken in spirit are made whole.

That's the church, that's this church, and we need your support to live out our calling and mission. We need money to do it, and there's no maybe about it.