

First Mennonite Church
THE MONEY CONUNDRUM
Luke 12:1-3, 13-23, Psalm 112

Luke 12:15: “Beware! Even when someone has more than enough,
their possessions do not give them life.”

Today I want to talk with you about one of Jesus’s favorite subjects, money. It’s my sense that when it comes to “church” the only time we mention money is when we are asking for it. Ironically, while Jesus talked a lot about money, he had little to say about fundraising. Why then did money matter to Jesus?

In our Gospel lesson Luke gives us a clue. As Luke tells his Jesus-story he is looking back some sixty years. Christianity is becoming a presence in the Roman Empire and in some places making headline news. The audience Luke addresses is urbane, more worldly savvy, culturally diverse and curious. Who are these people who call themselves Christians? What makes them tick? What’s unique in the way they look at life? You see, it was Christianity with its focus on **almsgiving – caring for the poor and needy** – that changed the face of philanthropy in the Greco Roman world. It was people of faith who turned acts of mercy and care into a public virtue.ⁱ

Luke’s Jesus looks at money he sees it as a conundrum, a challenging puzzle. On the one hand we can’t live without it. On the other hand, we don’t always know how to live with it. And now, for you and me, comes Covid-19 leaving many of us fretting over money with increasing angst. Will I have a job? Will I have enough to see me through retirement? Will I be able to make my mortgage payments? Can I afford college for my children? Jesus talked about money because he sensed that we humans cannot talk realistically about life without talking about money.

As Luke sets the stage for our story a large crowd has gathered to hear Jesus. Jesus is talking about the importance of telling the truth, of being honest and transparent. In the audience are people for whom religion is but a pious coverup for bad behavior. Jesus has a name for such people, he calls them hypocrites or religious play-actors. (12:1) Jesus then says: *“Remember, what you do and say in the dark will be heard in the light and what you whisper behind closed doors will be proclaimed from the housetop.”*

Jesus words catch the ear of a man in the crowd, laying bare his bruised soul. He's a man who's hurting, angry. He sees life as unfair. His father has died, and his conniving big brother is trying to defraud him of his part of the family inheritance. He listens to Jesus talk about telling the truth and the scam of onerous backroom deal-making and the simmering resentment sitting deep in his soul goes public as he blurts aloud for all to hear: *"Jesus, if what you say is true then tell my brother to share the family inheritance with me. I want what is mine!"* You can almost taste the silence as it slithers the crowd.

The money conundrum. How do we acquire it? How do we manage it? How do we spend it? Why do some have it and others don't?

Note the deftness with which Jesus shifts the conversation. Refusing to play the role of mediator Jesus focuses on the insatiable human desire to have just a little bit more saying: *"Life is not defined by what you have, even when you have a lot."* (12:16) Then, with a twinkle in his eye, Jesus does what he often did when confronted with a prickly question, he tells a story.

Once upon a time there was an old farmer who at harvest season was blessed with a bumper crop. It happened at a time when corn and soybean prices are at an all-time high. The farmer begins to ponder and dream as to what he might do with his *"more than enough."*

"Ah", he says to himself: *"I know what I will do, I will tear down my barns and build bigger ones. I'll make new investments, diversify my holdings so I can live a happy care-free life forever."* And that is when it happens. Plump in the middle of his conniving God pops up with what is the punch line of the story. God simply says: *"Fool! What will happen to all this money when you die, who will get it?"* Jesus then concludes: *"And that is how it is with those who store up treasures for themselves, living only for themselves."*

I listen to that story and I wonder why Jesus describes the farmer as *"fool?"* Not *fool* because he's a bad person. Not *fool* because he is doing something wrong with his money in his desire to secure for himself a comfortable retirement. Jesus calls him *fool* because he has confused the **means** of life with the **ends** of life. Money has become the endgame for which he now lives.

Fools confuse money with security, stuff with success, assets with self-worth, abundance with health. *Fools* fall for the Big Lie believing money to be the key to happiness and the well-lived life. The cunning of the money conundrum.

In a short story entitled *The Wallet* John Updike tells about a retired stockbroker named **Fulham**. Fulham is a man blessed with more than enough. Retired, he settles into a routine schedule. Every morning he patters upstairs to his office with the *Wall Street Journal* in one hand and a cup of decaffeinated coffee in the other to manage his investments. One day his world turns topsy-turvy; he can't find his wallet. He looks everywhere: under chairs, beds. He goes to the closet and rummages through pockets of suits he has not worn in months. At breakfast he announces to his wife that overnight someone slipped into their house and stole his wallet. His wife, taken aback by the rawness of his emotions replies: "*Fulham, I've never seen you like this, you're acting crazy, wild!*" "*Wild*" he cries, "*but it's my wallet...without my wallet I am nothing!*"

Last year I discovered that there is a Fulham living in me. It was Saturday night. My youngest granddaughter was with us and we had taken her to the movies. Returning home, I went into my study to read and watch the evening news. I was getting ready for bed when it happened. I reached into my pocket to put my wallet on the dresser and it wasn't there. I returned to my study and turned my easy chair upside down. I searched my car: No wallet. I went crazy. My wallet had a little cash, but it also held my credit cards and my driver's license. My wallet held my identity. It was past midnight when I drove to the movie theatre, my heart racing, my blood pressure off the charts, my shoulders were aching. An hour later I returned home my wallet in hand and my body a symphony of physical distress. Come morning I ended up in the hospital ER. No, I was not having a heart attack, just a reality-sobering panic attack. The pinch of the money conundrum; how it catches us at life's turnings.

In his recent book *For the Life of the World*, Yale theologian Miroslav Volf observes that modern culture is very clear as to what we must do if we are to have a good life; we must focus on the means, the path, to the good life. So, we invest our time and energy in securing the resources that we think make for the good life. A degree from the right school for our children, and I think of the recent college admissions scandal! A home in the right neighborhood, and I recall the Great Recession with many homes ending up under water! A job that carries

prestige and makes more money, and I think of the people I talk with who have money but no job satisfaction. Volf writes: “*When the means for life become the end for which we live, we become like a dog chasing its tail. Around and around and around we go in endless circles.*” as a gnawing emptiness slowly shrivels our souls. (pp. 26-27)

Jesus was on to something when he said: *Things/possessions/money, do not give life.* When the means becomes the end, life loses its balance and we lose our way.

What then is the end for which we live? Allow me to share an insight from my religious tradition. The old Presbyterian catechism answers that question this way: “*The chief end for which we live as Christians is to glorify God and enjoy God for ever.* What does that mean? To glorify God is to use the good gifts of creation in such a way as to put a smile on God’s face. To enjoy God is to use the gifts with which we have been blessed in such a way that they put the smile of gratitude on our face and those of people around us.

The key to the well lived life is to **pay attention! To listen!** To listen, to pay attention to what God is about in the world. The poet Danusha Lameris writes:ⁱⁱ

*How hidden is the sacred
Quickening in the dark
Behind the visible world.*

In this moment of pandemic disruption when we have no playbook to guide us to listen is to pay attention to the tears and sighs of those around us. As one of your Mennonite leaders phrased it in an article I read this week; to listen with prophetic imagination and patient persistence.”ⁱⁱⁱ Claim the richness of your heritage; it’s a gift our world sorely needs.

This week I visited the website of the Mennonite Church USA , I found your statement of faith to be riveting. Who you are , what do you believe? Answer:

- We believe that following Jesus in daily life is a central value.
- We believe that it is possible to follow Jesus as Lord above nationalism, racism or materialism.
- We believe that we can practice the way of Jesus’ reconciling love in human conflicts and warfare without striking out in fear to defend ourselves.

- We believe that we can live life simply and in service to others as a witness to God's love for the world.

Several years ago in December I was given a special Christmas present. I had taken my wife's car for a service checkup. The service manager asked me the usual set of questions: name, address, home telephone number, work number. Then he asked: "and what do you do?" I told him that I worked at the Center on Philanthropy at Indiana University where I was the director of an Institute focusing on the relationship between religion and philanthropy. Instantly a passionate smile circled his face. "Religion and philanthropy" he said. "I'm here in this country because of religion and philanthropy. I'm a native of Chile where my family was interned in a refugee camp during the Pinochet regime. It was the Mennonite Church who found me and brought me and my family to America. That experience has made me who I am. I now live to give back and serve others."

Then he told me how the previous weekend, he had taken his family downtown to see the Christmas decorations and have dinner. They came upon a homeless man asking for money for food. He said: "I looked at that man and told him that I was not going to give him money. Instead I invited him to join me and my family for dinner and we spend the evening together."

It would be presumptuous for me to tell you how to live with your money. So, I leave you with two take-home questions to ponder. First, are you using what has been given you to put a smile on God's face? Second, are you listening to the laments, the fears and longings of those around you?

ⁱ Peter Brown, "Poverty and Leadership in the Later Roman Empire"

" Danusha Lameris, "O Darkness"

ⁱⁱⁱ Leonard Dow, "The Christian Century", p. 20, 20/21/20,