



Why Did Jesus Talk So Much About Money?

TEXT
Luke 12:13–21

February 17, 2019 — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

Seventy years ago, Village Church took her first breath, and the Spirit has been generous to us ever since. Dr. Bob, the sower of good cheer, shepherded us for almost half a century. It makes me tired just to think about it. He moved through the neighborhood with sensible shoes, a bit of Vitalis and a confidence that God would be faithful. He was a pastor like none other.

Village was a Presbyterian Church, but it was just called Village because he wanted everyone to be welcome. People came by the thousands, and it became the second largest congregation in the denomination. Realizing that Village was started by the financial gifts of Presbyterians in distant cities, one of the first decisions as a church was to mortgage this property, so that we could give \$25,000 to the Board of American Mission to start another church. We learned something about ourselves in those days. We knew that God did not put us on this corner of Mission and 67th for our benefit alone.

The church grew so quickly that a new sanctuary was required, and in 1955, the construction of this sanctuary was

completed. Over the years, Village would be the place where music would serve a holy purpose and where children would be placed first, and where mission would be transformative and relational and where worship would proclaim the promised day of God. Dr. Bob would speak in the 60s of the evils of housing covenants; in the 70s of the sin of excluding gay and lesbian persons; and in the 80s of the narrow faith of what was called the religious right. And through it all, he would exhort us to be of courageous joy, of good cheer.

Village would be the place of Front Porch Alliance and the DRMP, of the Black Motivational Training Center and the Meneilly Center, and most recently, of Village on Antioch. Two hundred and eighty two faithful saints gathered in the chapel 70 years ago with a lot of hope, a deep commitment, and a trust that this church could make life better in this community and beyond. But there was no way they could know all that God would do over the decades. As we, 70 years later, look to the future, we should be informed by this past, and our dreams should not be timid. We could only

be timid if we don't believe in God.

I thought about taking a break from our series, "I Wish the Preacher Would Talk About ...," to focus just on this 70th birthday. But then I thought, perhaps one topic you requested might work on this day. You will be relieved that I wasn't drawn to the book of Revelation and the end times — not a great anniversary text. That's next week. No, you asked, "Why did Jesus teach about money so often?" I thought, "That works." Stay with me.

Jesus talked about money all the time. There's the rich young ruler. There's the story of that rich tax collector Zacchaeus. There's the rich man and Lazarus. He said, "Blessed are the poor," and he said, "Don't be anxious about food and clothes." He said, "Sell your possessions and give alms."

Mary sang, "He will fill the poor with good things, and the rich he will send away empty." Acts declares that the early followers of Jesus shared their possessions, and none had need. He talked about money a lot. I think money was on his mind all the time because money is so often on our minds.

Some of you asked, “What do we do with Jesus’ teaching about the poor? What does that mean for us in a capitalist society?” Others said, “Jesus is hard on wealthy folks ... can you tell us why he didn’t really mean that?” Some said, “Faith is supposed to be about spiritual matters. Why would you talk about money in church?” These are all good questions.

Let me get at this by exploring the story of the rich fool. Someone said, “I know why you picked that. You’re going to tell us, if we are going to be around for another 70 years, we are going to need some money.” Well, I can’t argue with that. And the truth is, I am never embarrassed to ask you to join me in financially supporting Village Church, because it makes a difference. I think Village is your best investment. But that is not what I’m talking about today.

Of all the times that Jesus spoke about money, not once did he mention the budget at the temple. Not once. He wasn’t talking about money because he was concerned about the church. He talked about money because he was concerned about the Christian. Money is a power and a spiritual matter. Money shapes our souls.

Jesus said, there was a farmer. The land he farmed produced a bumper crop, and he didn’t know what to do with all his wealth. So, he decided he would tear down his barns and build bigger ones. He had more than he needed, but his

immediate instinct was to keep all he assumed he had earned.

Now let me say this: I understand this guy, I think. Because, like you, I know what it is to be anxious about money. Maybe you have never been anxious about money, but 99 percent of the people in the world are. And when we worry about paying for kids’ college, or we worry about running out of money before we die, or we worry about new tires meaning we have to cut back on groceries, we get anxious. And to combat that anxiety, we try to build some barns. If we build some barns, we can ensure our future.

And of course, we tell ourselves that once we have enough, then we can be generous. But the truth is, for many, we never get enough. It works in reverse. The data suggests that the more we have, not the *more* generous we become, but the *less* generous we become. Of course, that’s not universally true, but it’s the trend. The more we have, the less we tend to give away. Having more does not ease our anxiety.

I think Jesus speaks to that anxiety. He teaches that the antidote to financial anxiety is not to build bigger barns, but to be generous. It is a spiritual truth that you will seldom find in Bloomberg Businessweek. The spiritual truth is that to address our anxiety, we need to practice generosity. It is very difficult to be generous and afraid.

My dad taught me this. My brother Gene was born with special needs. He spent most

of his early life hospitalized. After about a year of hospitalization, Dad got a letter saying most of my brother’s medical costs were not covered, and it was retroactive. He got a medical bill that exceeded his annual salary several times over. This still happens. He said he had never been so afraid, so out of control, so lost in his life.

With that bill in his hands, he went to the garage so that his children would not see him cry. In that moment of fear, he made a decision. In the moment when he knew his resources were inadequate, that was the moment he decided to tithe, to give away ten percent of his income. It was a moment that changed him. It freed him from being controlled by his finances. He was participating in God’s healing of the world. He told me he began to tithe because he was tired of being afraid. It is a practice he has maintained all of his life, and a practice he taught me.

I can tell you from my own experience, if you are generous enough to the point that it changes the priorities in your life, you will not only curb the anxiety, you will know a spiritual joy.

Jesus talks about money — not because he is concerned for the church, but because he loves the Christian.

But there is a larger point in this story. The second point is this: This man is alone. Let me read it again: He thought to *himself*, “What should *I* do, for *I* have no place to store *my* crops? Then he said, “*I* will do

this: *I will pull down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods.*"

Do you hear it? He is absolutely alone. He doesn't love his neighbor; he has no neighbor. All of his wealth cannot change the fact that he is spiritually bankrupt. He doesn't have possessions; he is possessed — owned by his *stuff*.

So, what was he supposed to have done? He needed to give some away. Because generosity is not just about our stuff; it's about our neighbors.

You see the spiritual temptation of having wealth is we can tell ourselves we don't need others. To assume we are independent in this world is spiritual bankruptcy.

Generosity is about community. It's about being better together than we have been. The practice of generosity is living the faith that we can be better tomorrow than we have been.

We were created to love God and love neighbor, and our money needs to reflect that purpose. Jesus once said, "Where your treasure is, your heart will be also." He didn't say your money will follow your heart; he said your heart will follow your money. If you want to know what you love, look at your checkbook. For generations, the church has sought to be a community that commits itself to the practice of loving neighbor.

So, why talk about money on the 70th anniversary? Be-

cause whenever we talk about money in church, we are talking about people.

What do you think life will be like in 70 years? Dramatically different in some ways, but there will be some things that are constant. A constant is the world will need a reminder that human beings are created to love God and love one another. And the world will need a community that will live in a way that demonstrates what that looks like.

So, in 2089, I imagine our children's children will put their offering in these plates so that the spiritual practice of being neighbors, the spiritual practice of friendship, will be lived here. Because I know this: The temptation will still be strong to assume that what we can put in our barns matters more than our neighbors. So this community will need a people to show them the truth.

And we will do that by putting children first and paying attention to the forgotten, by gathering the grieving and telling again the story of resurrection. We will do that by feeding the hungry and praying with the sick, and teaching young people that they can't afford to be timid in their dreams because God's dreams for us are always bigger than our dreams for ourselves.

We sometimes think, "Wow, if I really follow the teaching of Jesus, it can be unsettling; it can make me anxious." The truth is, we are already anxious. The healing for that anxiety is to follow the teach-

ing of Jesus. I am confident of this: In another 70 years, if we strive to follow him for another 70 years, God will lead us in good ways — and maybe we will be closer, just a bit closer, to God's promised day.

This sermon was delivered at Village Presbyterian Church, 6641 Mission Road, Prairie Village, KS 66208.

The sermon can be read, heard or seen on the church's website: <http://www.villagepres.org/current-sermonsermon-archives.html>.