

## Money is a Test

## Zephaniah 1 Matthew 25:14-30

In the Musical, Fiddler on the Roof - the main character, Tevye is constantly bemoaning his lack of money, hence his song, "If I Were A Rich Man." In a different part of the show, the Rabbi's son while picking up the milk for the Sabbath. Here's Tevye wishing for more money. HE immediately says, "Money is a curse." and Tevye responds, "May the Lord smite me with it.... And may I never recover!" Well, as you can see by the sermon title, I do not think money as a curse, or as evil. But, both our scriptures today suggest money is a test - a measurement of faithfulness. And this is true on both an individual level and on a community level.

First, let us look at the Gospel reading where we hear another of the tough parables of Jesus from the Gospel of Matthew about what it means to be a part of the Realm or Kingdom of Heaven. In it we have a tough master representing God who goes away, and charges his servants with taking care of his wealth. The first two make the money grow. Out of fear of the master the third is paralyzed and buries the coin lest he lose it. Well, the master is not happy, and not only takes the coin from him, but punishes him severely. Now this kind of punitive image of God is one we don't like and to me lends credence to the thought that this series of parables is not from Jesus. Never the less, we must deal with the message it is trying to tell us. And I think that message is that we must take very seriously the gifts God has given to us, both monetary and the talents and energy we have.

I once heard someone say that each of us writes a major theological treatise in our life. A book that reflects our core values, our hopes and our beliefs. What is that book? Before I tell you I want to take a survey: how many of you have a checkbook? OK Well, for those who don't let me explain that back in ancient times before debit cards we actually wrote out things called checks that were physically deposited in the bank and money was transferred accordingly. As you have already guessed, the book of theology and faith that I was talking about is our checkbook. Now of course our

running debit card tally works as well, but one of the great things about checkbooks was they had a register where you wrote what you spent.

In the same way, how an entire culture spends its money also indicates its beliefs and faith. Our Hebrew scripture was from the Book of Zephaniah. This book, one of the shortest in the Hebrew Scriptures has the Prophet Zephaniah announcing the judgment of God on the People of Jerusalem. Earlier in the chapter, he highlights that the people of God are not taking care of the widows and the orphans and the poor. And not only that, but in the portion we heard, the people are apathetic about it - thinking God doesn't care so why should they. This scripture makes clear that God agrees with that old adage "the opposite of love is not hate, it is apathy." And in one of the most startling and ironic pronouncement of judgment, Zephaniah declares that God has prepared an altar upon which God will sacrifice the people of Israel, like they sacrifice animals on the altar of the temple. And the sacrifice will be complete when a great conquering army will come in and destroy the city, and no amount of money will keep the apathetic residents safe.

This description of God's judgment on the nation reminds us that God is not only interested in our individual checkbooks, but the city's and the nation's. This story is nothing new, God's interest in economic justice and the treatment of the poor and oppressed is rampant in the Scriptures. Starting with the story of Cain and Abel we are told that God believes we are our brother's and sister's keeper. We are charged to keep them safe and fed and sheltered. This week the story of another person who believes that was highlighted in the news: The man at the helm of a Kentucky university is giving up \$90,000 from his salary to gain something priceless: satisfied employees. "I think it will be impactful. How impactful, I don't know," said Raymond Burse, interim president of Kentucky State University in Frankfort, who is taking the pay cut so the lowest-paid workers on his campus can get a wage boost. Burse, a Rhodes Scholar who had been president of Kentucky State in the 1980s and

then went on to have a successful business career until 2012, was cajoled out of retirement this year to head the university once again. His first move: find out who was making the least money, and help them out. By reducing his own annual salary of \$349,869 by more than \$90,000, 24 employees got a pay hike that took them from \$7.25 an hour to \$10.25 an hour.

"It was about the act of doing something that would be impactful to individuals to whom I was going to demand a lot from, and so that's what it's all about," Burse said. His generosity comes with expectations. "This is not a gift ... It is an investment," he said. "I expect these people to work hard because they are all a part of this university." Burse himself once worked minimum-wage jobs, and he chooses not to forget his roots. "I look at myself as a poor country kid from Hopkinsville, Kentucky, trying to do well in this world by treating people right."

This action made a huge difference for those 24 people in that university community. But it is a Canary in the Coalmine moment. It indicates that we are all in danger if the working people at the bottom of the pay scale are so underpaid that such a heroic gesture is needed. And that became clear about our community last week when the Bradenton Herald told of a report that United Way produced showed nearly one-third of Manatee County residents are a paycheck away from poverty. 30 percent of our neighbors are in danger of falling into poverty and that's in addition to the 13 percent who already live in poverty. Almost half our population are in a precarious financial position.

The study done by Rutgers University calls people in this situation ALICEs, for Asset Limited, they have no back-up plans or emergency funds. Income Constrained, - their potential pay is very limited. But they are Employed. In an interview Philip Brown, President of the United Way of Manatee County said, "Every Starbucks and grocery store we walk into are staffed by Alices... this a real opportunity for the community to mobilize in a different sort of way and for our leaders to ...consider this

part of our community that affects all of us, whether we are in ALICE or not."

I think President Brown has shed light on an ever growing group of people in our culture. We are talking about people with jobs but who don't make enough to have even a minimum personal safety net. Former Federal Reserve Chairman Alan Greenspan recently said, "I consider income inequality the most dangerous part of what's going on in the United States. You can see the deteriorating impact of that on our current political system, and you cannot talk about politics without talking about its impact on the economy."

One of our roles as people of faith in this culture is to bring forth the whole Gospel of Jesus. And part of this Gospel is in today's scriptures where each of us are held accountable for how we spend our money, and we as a culture are challenged to take care of those in greatest danger. And I am tired of the lie that unbridled capitalism is congruent with Scripture. When God rides a horse, she doesn't let it go wherever it wants to go. Jesus teaches that greed is the root of much evil. We must remind the culture that America is called the Land of Opportunity, not because everyone who emigrates becomes filthy rich - and please note the adjective there. This country is great because common people can or could in the past work hard and have a life where they can feed their families, have health care, have someone at home enough to raise children and those children could do a little better than their parents. This is the American Dream and this is well supported by scripture. We do good things for the poorest of the poor almost weekly here at Faith, but we must also raise our voices for the ALICEs - for those who are one illness or one paycheck or one death in the family away from becoming destitute. As Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. reminded us, "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice anywhere." For the sake of our lives and the lives of our sisters and brothers we must not sit silently in the comfort of apathy as lives hang in the balance. AMEN