

HEBREWS 9:24-28

²⁴For Christ did not enter a sanctuary made by human hands, a mere copy of the true one, but he entered into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf. ²⁵Nor was it to offer himself again and again, as the high priest enters the Holy Place year after year with blood that is not his own; ²⁶for then he would have had to suffer again and again since the foundation of the world. But as it is, he has appeared once for all at the end of the age to remove sin by the sacrifice of himself. ²⁷And just as it is appointed for mortals to die once, and after that the judgment, ²⁸so Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin, but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him.

MARK 12:38-44

³⁸As he taught, he said, "Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, ³⁹and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets! ⁴⁰They devour widows' houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation."

⁴¹He sat down opposite the treasury, and watched the crowd putting money into the treasury. Many rich people put in large sums. ⁴²A poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which are worth a penny. ⁴³Then he called his disciples and said to them, "Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury. ⁴⁴For all of them have contributed out of their abundance; but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on."

SERMON

When I was a kid I had a toy cash register that I loved playing with. I'll bet that more than a few of you all had exactly the same one in your houses. It was kind of an orangy-brown plastic thing, with a green handle on the side. You could put your plastic coins along the top and then slip them in to make a "sale" by grabbing that green handle. It made a satisfying "ding!" every time you put the coins in the register or popped the drawer open to give your fake-grocery

store customer their fake-change on their fake-purchase of plastic eggs and apples. I loved that cash register as a kid, and today one of the things Enoch is asking me for as a birthday gift is, weirdly enough, a toy cash register. I've seen this in my cousins and in my friends' children. There's something that kids love about playing with fake money and a playschool cash register.

It's probably something very similar to the reason kids like to play doctor or dress up in mom and dad's shoes or carry their own purse out on errands or copy the words they hear us say. Children love to mimic the way adults speak and act and work. They like to play at being grown ups, and a really significant part of our life as adults involves money. Doing a job to earn a paycheck, spending money on groceries or new clothes, paying bills, going to the bank to deposit a check. In all sorts of parenting magazines and books the general advice is to make sure you expose children to the realities of money from a young age, especially in homes where less and less of our money-related activities actually involve a physical bank or check book or even real dollars and coins. When we talk with children about money and involve them, as appropriate, in family money-decision making, the hope is that children are raised with less of a taboo around finances, that when they get older they'll be able to talk about money more openly, ask for advice and help when needed, and make wiser and more informed decisions about the ways that they spend, save, and earn.

And this, I think, is pretty sound parenting advice. Not because money is some special topic, but because it treats money the way we treat so many other parts of our lives. As parents we spend time talking to our kids about their health and safety, we discuss matters

of faith and spirituality. We encourage our kids to discuss their education with us, their friend issues, what they'd like for dinner tonight, which job they might see themselves doing someday, whether grandma would like the blue or the pink scarf for her birthday. We talk to our kids about everything, we involve them in our decision making, and when money is a part of this pattern, our kids start to learn that money is just another facet of how we live our lives, not something special or taboo or not open for discussion.

And it's true! Because money isn't, in and of itself, anything special. It's really just a tool for how we go about doing our living and working in this world. Instead of carrying around a backpack of chickens to barter and trade for the loaf of bread I want at the market, I can conveniently just pull out a couple of pieces of paper or, even better, a plastic card that remembers how much money, or I guess how many chickens, I have at my disposal to trade for that loaf of bread. But money, like any other tool, is not just a practical tool, it's a moral tool as well. So, think about a hammer, right? It's a practical tool, and it can be used for moral, immoral, and amoral reasons. It may be a tool for moral action when wielded by Jimmy Carter, who spent this week building homes with Habitat for Humanity. It can be an amoral tool, as when it's just used to build a random house on any random street for no particular good or bad person. Just a hammer, just a nail. Or, it can be a tool put toward immoral means, like hurting another person or smashing in the windshield of your enemy's car.

You could say the same thing about the words we use with one another. Speech is just a tool. It can be used for highly moral and wonderful purposes. You can think of some of the great speeches of

Lincoln that we read about in school for an example. The Gettysburg address or the Emancipation Proclamation. His words literally set people free. Or, words can be amoral. There's nothing inherently good or bad about saying "please pass the salt" or "can you turn off the light before coming to bed?" Of course, we all know how words can be used in immoral ways. It seems to me the primary role I fill as a parent these days is reminding my children to use kind words with one another. To stop saying things like "dumb" or "stupid" and to use their words to tell the truth and not lie.

Money is like this, as well. It can be used as a tool for great good, purchasing food to feed those who are hungry. It can be amoral, buying some eggs for your family this week. Or, of course, money can be immoral, as when it's used to sway the vote or action of a public official with a bribe. But even moreso than the physical dollars and coins or even plastic cards we use to pay one another for goods and services with, money is moral in a global sense. The overarching patterns of how we use money say really important things about who we are as people and what we value.

In my work as your pastor, I spend some of my time serving other churches in the region, and I often get called in to help mediate issues of conflict between people in congregations. Before I go in to any church to talk with their pastor or session, I always ask for a copy of their most recent budget. Because a budget will tell you loads about what a church values. There are, of course, fixed costs, like a building or stamps or whatever. But beyond those, how does the church use their money? Do they pay their pastor fairly? What about the other staff members? If it's a large church, how do they pay their associate pastors in relation to the senior pastor? How is

the money divvied up between the arms of the church? How much is spent on mission and outreach versus on the education of the children versus on donuts for coffee hour? Budgets are moral documents. Earlier this year, Vice President Joe Biden said exactly this, he said, “Don’t tell me what you value. Show me your budget and I’ll tell you what you value.”

And think about that. It’s true, right? Put your money where your mouth is and all that.

Jesus talked about money more than anything else in the whole of the gospels, and for Jesus, money is always a moral issue. Just a few weeks ago we heard one of his parables, about a vineyard owner who pays everyone a full day’s wage, even if they did less than a full day’s work. There’s something to that parable, Jesus is saying something about the economics of having enough. And there are so many more examples, I have a list if you’re interested. Throughout the Gospels, money is always there.

In some ways, money is kind of behind the scenes. We hear stories all the time about the disciples who dropped their fishing nets to follow Jesus. And that’s great. But how do you expect that Jesus and those disciples ate? Where do you think they slept? Who mended their sandals and washed their clothes? There’s a second kind of disciple in the gospels, and they are harder to spot, but once in a while we hear about Mary, Martha, and Lazarus or the other people, mostly women, who stayed put, in their villages, going about their daily work, who gave their money, time, and skills to be sure Jesus didn’t starve and he always had a place to stay. The church was

established in the homes of folks who gave from what they had to support this fledgling ministry.

And in today's reading, Jesus is doing what we would consider one of the rudest possible church behaviors. He's peeking at the offering plate as each person puts their money in! He's standing right there, looking over their shoulders, and commenting on it! How rude! Plenty of wealthier folks come in and put in respectable or even generous sums of money. Wonderful! We need those folks, our church budget relies on them. But Jesus remains silent. Then along comes this older woman, a widow, and she puts in two little coins, just a penny. And he turns to his disciples and says, "did you see that?" Those others gave out of their surplus and extra. But she gave all she had, her giving was a sacrifice.

Now, let's just be clear here, Jesus isn't giving his disciples a crash course in home economics. He's not praising the widow for the fact that she has nothing to live on. He's not disparaging the gifts of the others or recommending that they're somehow immoral for being wealthy or paying their bills or whatever. Jesus isn't talking about the practical details of how we budget.

What Jesus is doing here is highlighting the fact that our life of faith should impact our spending. Faith should impact every aspect of how we live, from what we eat to how we vote to what we spend. And it seems to me that what he's praising this woman for is the priority and sacrifice she exemplifies in her giving. The others, those who give out of surplus, it's almost as if it's an afterthought, rather than a considered and intentional part of their home budget. Do you see that difference? How much we give matters, for sure, but

it's also so important that we are thoughtful in our giving, that we use money as a way of living out a life of faith. It shouldn't be an aside or an afterthought. If being a Christian, and specifically part of a particular faith community matters to you, people should be able to see that in your budget.

As people of faith, the words and stories of scripture, and especially the words and teachings of Jesus should challenge and change every part of how we live. The way I read and understand scripture affects the vote I cast this past week and how I choose to interact with politics in this country.. The teachings of Jesus affect the food that John and I choose to purchase and eat. On my good days, the stories of our faith shape my parenting. I honestly seek out the perspective of my community in major life decisions I am making, and I pray for guidance in the words I say and the actions I undertake. Why should money be any different from any of this? If we take the teachings of Jesus seriously, and I hope we do, money isn't any different. It's a part of our life of faith. Using the money we've been given to reflect the calling of our discipleship. To allow our family budgets to be shaped by, and thus reflective of, the calling we're living into. To advocate for the appropriate allocation of public funds for the greatest good of people, to see that our church's budget tells a story of what our community values and believes, to give our money to the church and to other good organizations, not as an afterthought or out of guilt, but instead out of a concerted belief that we are called to be wise and thoughtful and generous in what we've been given. To let our money, as in every other part of our life, be an agent for bringing the kingdom of God here and now. Thanks be to God. Amen.