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Investing in God's Work

Today we launch our 2022 annual pledge campaign. So I'm going to talk for a few minutes about money, even though it makes us all a little uncomfortable. The Gospels tell us that Jesus talked about money a lot but we try to avoid it or hide from it in church. We are reluctant to share our income or our charitable giving. Why is that? Are we ashamed of what we earn or of what we give away? Maybe it's an indication that our relationship to money isn't as healthy as it could be.

Have you noticed that two conflicting ideas about wealth co-exist in Scripture? On the one hand there's the attitude that wealth is a sign of God's approval and blessings: look at the happy ending of the book of Job, where God rewards Job with even more wealth than he had at the beginning of the story, or the Psalms that sing about how the righteous shall prosper. On the other hand there's God's clear love and concern for the poor – the last, the lost, and the least in our world. As we see in Matthew's Gospel where Jesus says that to the extent that we care for the "least of these brothers and sisters", we care for him, and when we care for Jesus, we care for God. And Jesus himself was one of the poor.

The prophet Amos was a man of humble origins, a tree-trimmer and herdsman, who was called to a challenging ministry of drawing attention to systemic injustice and inequity in Israel, at a time when the nation was enjoying unprecedented levels of wealth and security. Amos doesn't mince his words as he condemns the country's reliance on military strength and the abuses and corruption practiced by the wealthy and influential. He fearlessly confronts the powerful high priest, and even after being expelled from the royal temple, he paints a grim picture of the doom that will fall on Israel if her leaders continue oppressing the poor.

What might Amos say about the shenanigans of the wealthiest people in our world today? This week's revelations in the press about the enormous sums of money hidden in trusts by the very wealthy didn't surprise me. Like the wealthy man in the Gospel, those who have great wealth don't want to lose it. And they have the resources to hide their wealth, so that they cannot be compelled to pay their fair share towards the common good. Meanwhile the gap between rich and poor grows wider and wider across the globe. The international group of journalists who are reporting on the hidden billions have repeatedly been told that the wealthy people involved have not broken any laws by hiding their money in this way. If something is not expressly forbidden, it must be OK, right? Surely this hiding behavior reflects something unhealthy in these people's relationship with money. If you are worth \$100 million, how can you possibly be anxious about money? What difference is it going to make to your life whether you pay \$1,000 in taxes or \$10 million? You will still be well insulated from ever lacking anything at all that you might want.

In the church we don't need to hide our wealth. Nobody can force you to give. There is no membership fee for being a Christian, or an Episcopalian, or a parishioner of St. Paul's Cathedral. And putting guilt trips on people with speeches about how tight the budget is and how we have to scrimp and save to pay our wonderful staff only goes so far. What we cannot escape,

however, is Scripture, God's word that teaches us explicitly to let go of the first 10% of our income, the traditional tithe, as a starting point, that symbolizes our trust in God to take care of us no matter what, even if the next 90% never materializes. And we have the testimony of centuries of faithful people, speaking to the joy and freedom that comes with being generous towards God.

The ancient Jews lived by the Law of Moses, a strict set of rules covering every aspect of life. They regarded the Law, not as a burden but as a blessing: after all, God loved them enough to provide them with guidelines for living, and that made them special, uniquely blessed. Can we turn around our attitude to giving in a similar way? Can we let go of the resentment and anxiety we often feel when someone asks us for money and instead see it as an invitation, an opportunity to do something beautiful and generous in God's name? Can we trust in God rather than in our bank balances?

St. Paul's has a vision for the future: we will be a center of community life, spreading love and light to our neighbors, enriching and transforming lives through the use of our buildings and the ministry of our people. This is God's work and we get to participate in it. What a blessing that is. This is why my pledge is the second largest expenditure of my monthly budget, coming in only behind the mortgage. Who wouldn't want to share in such a vision? Who wouldn't want to invest in it?

Now, you may think that you cannot give enough to make a difference, or that you will be regarded as less valuable to the community if you can only promise a little. This week I wrote my first few thank-you letters for 2022 pledges. I look forward to writing about 300 of those letters. Last year's pledges ranged from under \$100 to over \$80,000. Everyone got a letter. Because everyone gives according to their means, and all are equally valuable and beloved of God.

In our Gospel story, Jesus loves the rich man for his good heart, and then, in the context of that love, tells him to give everything up. He can tell from the expensive clothing and the jewelry that this man is wealthy. In the eyes of the disciples this wealth makes the man more, not less, likely to be favored by God, because it's much easier for those with resources to obey all the Pharisees' rules and regulations. Keeping the law (checking the boxes) is easy: actively letting go of attachment to wealth is terribly hard. Jesus has zeroed in on the key weakness in this man: his dependence on material security. This man hasn't yet experienced the joy of generosity, of giving for the sake of his spiritual health rather than because it's required of him. His relationship to money has been self-centered, using it to gain his own salvation rather than benefiting others. Jesus is inviting him to develop a new relationship to money, to reorder his priorities, to break free of the shackles that hold him captive. He goes away shocked and sad, confronting a difficult decision, and we never hear if he later returns joyfully released from his anxiety. I would like to think that he does.

Why were the disciples amazed by Jesus's words? Because, under the rigid rules of the Pharisees, who had expanded the Law to extreme details, it was almost impossible for poor people to maintain ritual purity. The disciples were stuck in an old way of thinking: that keeping

kosher and avoiding mixing fabrics and observing all the little rituals was a prescription for God's favor. Jesus wanted them to throw that away and instead embrace the radical idea that they were loved and accepted as they were, regardless of what they ate or what they wore or how much they gave to the temple. Because a life of faith isn't about checking boxes and gaining points: it's about being transformed in your relationships – with family, with money, and with God.

We still have remnants of that worldview among us: in America there is an enduring sense that being poor is a character flaw; that if you are poor it's because you haven't tried hard enough or you didn't deserve to make it. This country's history is littered with examples of people being punished for being poor; having their children taken away from them; being imprisoned for debt; low-income neighborhoods torn apart by highway development projects or toxic waste dumps. And yet poverty is most often a function of systemic oppression or even sheer bad luck. All it takes for millions of our brothers and sisters is to be born in the wrong place, or to lose your job because of an accident or a pandemic. The Sacred Ground curriculum that many of us studied over the past year opened our eyes to this reality.

Today's Gospel is a lesson in extreme discipleship. Jesus uses all kinds of extravagant language to get his points across: sell everything you own; a rich person cannot enter the kingdom of God; harder than a camel going through the eye of a needle; you will get a hundredfold return on your investment; the first will be last, and the last first. The images are extreme and contradictory, because Jesus wants to shake his listeners up, to make them understand how radical his way of love is. How hard is it to commit your life to Jesus? Very hard; perhaps impossibly hard. But still worthwhile.

And Jesus offers an amazing return on investment: if you take the plunge, give up everything that you have been clinging to and follow him, putting your whole trust in his grace and love, you will receive back 100 times what you lost. This doesn't mean that if you give up \$1 you will get \$100. It means that if you give up the imperfect, unreliable sense of security that your bank account offers you, what one commentator calls "all the fraudulent and collapsible supports, epitomized by wealth", you will find true security and freedom from care in the service of the kingdom of God. And that's an investment well worth making. Amen.