

“Bottom-Line Camel Talk”
Sermon by Rev. Tom Warren
Peace United Church of Christ
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If you didn't hear that response from Peter the way it probably was said (referring to the scripture reading from Mark 10:17-27), it probably was something like "Look, we have given up everything and we have followed you. What more do you want?". I can only imagine that as Jesus was teaching about the most private things of our lives (that being money) those disciples, and anyone else who was hearing Jesus teach, were probably getting a little bit antsy.

Scholars say that this is one of the teachings that Jesus most definitely taught and that it is not really one that we can get away from, so my experience of this teaching, and perhaps for many of you, is that this is very difficult stuff. It is sort of the cutting edge of the gospel. It is probably mainly even why the gospel is so difficult.

I began to think, what is the relationship that we have with money? I thought that, in some ways, our relationship with money is, or at least has the potential to be, like an addictive relationship with drugs, but then I thought about the relationship that people addicted to drugs and alcohol have. Having worked in rehab. programs and having been involved with different 12-step programs, one of the things I learned is that although it is never easy and is, in fact, very difficult, when one wants to recover from drug or alcohol addiction they need to get to the point where they can stop consuming drugs or alcohol, and they may get there through 12-step programs, counseling or whatever, but the bottom line is that, to enter into recovery from drugs and/or alcohol, you have to stop using those substances, so I thought maybe that's not the metaphor that we need to think about in our relationship to money.

Then, I thought about the addiction that people struggle with in terms of food. I have known loved ones and other people and friends who have had anorexia, bulimia and other distorted relationships with food—people who have had to go for treatment for their food addiction, and while addiction to drugs and alcohol is so difficult, addiction to food is complicated because we cannot stop eating food. If we have a problem with food addiction, we have to develop a whole new relationship with that food, so on some level it seems to me that food addiction is not any easier than drugs or alcohol but a new level of complication, because one cannot stop eating and one must redefine that relationship with food.

I want to suggest that our relationship with money is something like that. We have intimate relationships with money. We all, on one level or another, desire money. We need money. We need it to live. We need it to pay bills. We need it for all types of practical reasons. Money, as some of you may or may not know (not infidelity), or financial stress, is the greatest cause of divorce. In a culture that stresses money so much, and in a culture that has over 50% of marriages ending in divorce, financial stresses are the number one cause of divorce, so we deal with this relationship with money.

Now, in this story from the Gospel of Mark, Jesus, of course, is teaching and He is teaching in the beginning passages of this story about this rich, young ruler who asked this question: "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus said, of course "Follow the Commandments", and this rich, young ruler said "I do all that", so what Jesus is dealing with here is a religious person. He is faithful to the Torah. He practices and tries to follow the Commandments, but then Jesus says "You have a lot of wealth. You have to give it away", and this rich, young ruler turns to despair and flees. It was a moment when this rich, young ruler was confronted with his life, confronted with the priorities of his life—priorities that he just couldn't change, or at least at that moment.

Jesus goes on in that passage to teach His disciples, and He talks about how wealth is an obstacle, and He gives this wonderful passage that we all know about it being easier for a camel to get through

the eye of a needle which is a clever way for Jesus to say that wealthy people are going to have a hard time getting into the kingdom of God. Peter, of course, responds by defending the disciples and is, as I said at the beginning, very frustrated. This money thing is really rattling them.

So, the underlying question is: Why did Jesus have such harsh language and harsh metaphors and harsh teachings and wealth? Why is that such an essential component of the gospel according to Jesus? One of the answers to that, it seems to me, as much as we need it, and the old phrase that it is not money that is the root of all evil but it is the love of money (I think that's right), is that wealth has seductive powers and its pursuit requires our allegiance. Wealth sucks us in and asks us to be allegiant to that pursuit. It requires of its participants to be motivated by the idols of our world, so it is seductive. It draws us in. In our culture, it seems to me that what we used to have as our economic system said that what was good made money, so when we made good products, good washing machines and so forth and so on, when we made those good things, we made money, but a flip has occurred so that today what makes money is good. It's an important switch that has happened. It is not about the good product will generate money and good products and all that, but it has sort of flipped so that what makes money is good and the consequence of that flip is that it flips our moral and ethical code upside down. We have a tendency to celebrate those people and institutions, companies and all of that which makes money regardless of the moral and ethical implications of how they made the money, so we live in an interesting dynamic.

Now, as a personal ethic, and as people who want to struggle with this teaching of Jesus and our money relationship, I want to suggest that money needs to become part of our spiritual discipline. Jesus says in this passage that you lessen the ability of money to control your life by giving it away, by using it for the greater good and that, somehow, by doing that we are able to relinquish the control that money can have on our lives and in worship, of course, part of the offering is part of a worshipful act, a spiritual discipline, that we honor God by giving the blessings that we have known away to support the church, to support the ministries of the church, to support our abilities to build God's kingdom, so these passages about money are difficult and such a great challenge.

We were talking this morning in the 'Out Of The Box' group about how do we live these difficult ethical teachings that Jesus puts before us and how do we try to live those and not be overwhelmed by them, or how do we just put up our hands and say, you know, I just cannot do that so I'm not going to try. Well, the way we do that is to remember that we live by God's grace. We live by the fact that God is a God of love and grace and mercy and that there is always that tension between God's grace and God's commandment because we always fall short of the sort of high bar of God's teachings, whether it is Jesus talking about money or the Ten Commandments in the Hebrew Bible. We always fall short on some levels, but we are caught by the net of God's grace, and we can't live without that grace. We can't live in our economic system without that grace because the fact of the matter is that this is something we all know—that we are all so dependent upon God's grace which is God's utter love and forgiveness, that we are okay. We are not let off the hook of anything but we recognize that we are, in the end, saved by grace and not by works, so as we try to live out these very difficult teachings by Christ about money, we do so, and we struggle to do so together while never forgetting that God's grace will get us through.

We, as the people of Christ, as people of the church, struggle together. We try to build into our spiritual lives disciplines about money. We try to remember that, in our economic system, there are ethics at work—at least for us. We remember that, when a society is built upon simply the bottom line, it cannot sustain itself because we always have to have our neighbor in mind. We always have to remember that we are looking out for one another, so it is true that the love of money is the root of all evil, but money itself is not, and we can use our money to make this world a better place, so we are challenged this day by the teachings of Christ to remember that we are called to use our money in a healthy and holy way and to share that money as we are able. Thanks be to God. Amen.