

**Riverside United Church**  
**October 27, 2024**

**Scripture Lesson: Deuteronomy 15: 1-11**

Every seventh year you shall grant a remission of debts. And this is the manner of the remission: every creditor shall remit the claim that is held against a neighbour, not exacting it from a neighbour who is a member of the community, because the Lord's remission has been proclaimed. From a foreigner you may exact it, but you must remit your claim on whatever any member of your community owes you. There will, however, be no one in need among you, because the Lord is sure to bless you in the land that the Lord your God is giving you as a possession to occupy, if only you will obey the Lord your God by diligently observing this entire commandment that I command you today. When the Lord your God has blessed you, as he promised you, you will lend to many nations, but you will not borrow; you will rule over many nations, but they will not rule over you.

If there is among you anyone in need, a member of your community in any of your towns within the land that the Lord your God is giving you, do not be hard-hearted or tight-fisted towards your needy neighbour. You should rather open your hand, willingly lending enough to meet the need, whatever it may be. Be careful that you do not entertain a mean thought, thinking, 'The seventh year, the year of remission, is near', and therefore view your needy neighbour with hostility and give nothing; your neighbour might cry to the Lord against you, and you would incur guilt. Give liberally and be ungrudging when you do so, for on this account the Lord your God will bless you in all your work and in all that you undertake. Since there will never cease to be some in need on the earth, I therefore command you, 'Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbour in your land.'

**Matthew 19:16-22**

Then someone came to him and said, 'Teacher, what good deed must I do to have eternal life?' And he said to him, 'Why do you ask me about what is good? There is only one who is good. If you wish to enter into life, keep the commandments.' He said to him, 'Which ones?' And Jesus said, 'You shall not murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; Honour your father and mother; also, You shall love your neighbour as yourself.' The young man said to him, 'I have kept all these; what do I still lack?' Jesus said to him, 'If you wish to be perfect, go, sell your possessions, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.' When the young man heard this word, he went away grieving, for he had many possessions.

**Prayer of Illumination:**

God of Life, may the words of my mouth, and the meditations of all our minds and hearts, lead us to deeper understanding of you, and the love you call us to live. Amen.

**"Our Money Story: Release"**

In the gospel stories we hear of Jesus interacting with other people. The stories usually end up with the person following Jesus, or the conversation ends with mutual growth or insight. Maybe those were the stories that were remembered through the years of oral tradition. Maybe they were

remembered because they were stories told over and over again by the person themselves, and then their descendants.

Then there is the story we hear today - the story of rich young man. This is a challenging story in our context and culture and it was a challenging story for the rich young man because the story tells us that he went away grieving. He turned away from the path that Jesus was teaching.

I wonder what happened next for him.

He had asked the question, “What good deed must I do to inherit eternal life? Jesus said keep the commandments and the conversation unfolded, and the man said that he done those, but was still lacking. And so Jesus says go and sell your possessions. There is also reference to “be perfect” and the Greek word does not mean “without defect, without mistakes”; a better translation of that Greek word would be devotion, faithfulness, seek fulfillment, enter into life.

It is interesting that with all the emphasis in some branches of the Christian church on the literal meaning and interpretation of the Bible that this story is largely ignored. This story is soon followed in Matthew’s narrative by the troubling verse: “It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.” Now there are various explanations of this metaphor and image and most of them seek to distract attention away from Jesus saying that wealth can be problematic for faithful living.

While those who adopt a literal understanding of Scripture may resist or ignore these verses, these branches of the church have produced a theology which is often referred to as the prosperity gospel. The prosperity gospel preaches that wealth and good fortune is a sign of God’s blessing. The opposite of that statement - could be that poverty and misfortune must be a sign of God’s curse may be one of the reasons why there is so little action to address poverty and injustice in some circles of Christianity. Economic systems and individual circumstance have a lot more to do with gaps in wealth than God choosing who to favour and who to curse.

But, let’s go back to the rich young man because even though we don’t know a lot about him, his money story may resonate, his spiritual story may be more common than we can imagine. What good deed must I do to have eternal life? Follow the commandments - I have done that he replies. Be perfect, or Be Faithful, Strive to Be and to know fulfillment - which is an internal, spiritual integration of all the pieces and aspects of living.

It is said that there is a lot of spiritual hunger in our time, especially among those who may be by the standards of this world, quite successful especially among those who we might classify as young..

As we continue our series on Our Money Story, we build on the theme of remember from last week. We are invited to remember the generosity of God as we seek our daily bread. This week we add the word “release” to our reflection.

I wonder what the rich young man needed to release? What was it that prompted him to engage in conversation with Jesus? What was it that caused him to turn and walk away from Jesus’

wisdom?

In our own lives, in our own money stories, where do we need release? Release from expectations, release from fear, from insecurity, from uncertainty, release from shame and guilt? Maybe we need release from all the ways that we have learned that our net worth determines our self worth.

I imagine that the rich young man couldn't imagine selling all that he had because he might have then wondered "who would I be?"

It is a spiritual challenge in our time to nurture self worth, when we are bombarded by messages that our image, our worth is determined by what we wear, where we live, what we drive, what toys we own, etc. etc. In our consumer society, it can be hard to resist bowing down to the god of money because we are taught that determines who we are.

Now many of us have sorted out how to live amidst those messages, and not to be totally captivated by them, because the sense of identity and values - the "to be" is more important than the "to have". But, that is a constant struggle in our time. There is release built into the messaging. We have been told that financial freedom can come at 55. How many has that worked out for? We are shown through much advertizing that we can be released from financial pressures, life pressures, if we win the lottery.

But, Jesus was offering a deeper sense of release. Jesus offers a different framework of understanding the path to fulfillment, the way of abundance. Jesus was steeped in the Jewish tradition which taught about tithes and about years of jubilee and forgiveness of debt. In the reading from Deuteronomy we hear about a system where every 7 years debts are to be forgiven by one another. The system is further detailed in other places that after 7 cycles of 7 years, - so every 50<sup>th</sup> year - there is to be a year of jubilee which is an economic, communal, environmental reset where the land and people rest. This system was designed to prevent the wealth gap from growing beyond repair.

Can you imagine how such a framework would work in our time? Maybe it is too hard to imagine because it is so different than our dominant economic understanding. I remember as the year 2000 approached, there was a call for a Year of Jubilee, and the focus was on a movement to try to release some nations from the debt of the World Monetary Fund, but it was not fully successful and so many nations are so in debt that they can never recover. I see a lot of Facebook posts and I think that in the US forgiveness of student debt and how any movement toward that idea are rejected by companies and individuals who can write off debt expenses from what they pay in taxes, etc.

One of the economic teachings of Jesus is warning about usury - charging exorbitant rates of interest on loans, etc. I wonder what Jesus might say about some of our economic realities. Maybe I don't really want to know or apply what he does say because we are all part of our current system and benefit or held captive by it to varying degrees.

In our readings today we hear a story about an individual and one about a communal system, and maybe the challenge is to find ways to find the gift of release as we ponder both of those realities.

I wonder how the young rich man would have responded if Jesus had suggested to him that we sell 10% of his possessions and give the money to the poor. The shock of the story is the 100% and maybe the young man needed that shock, maybe Jesus knew that he needed a more drastic invitation to reflection and release.

Through the Hebrew narrative, there is an invitation to return 10% of crops, of wealth to God, through giving to the poor, etc. There are Christian churches that expect a 10% tithe as a condition of membership. That is not our tradition and when we get into that conversation, there are lots of questions about before or after taxes, and whether it is gross or net income, what about other charities, etc.

The wisdom of the tithe teaching is that giving is a means of recognizing and integrating the reality that we are not just individuals. We have a collective responsibility along with an individual need. One of the ways we love our neighbour is through generosity of treasure. One of the ways that we can focus on what it means "to be" faithful rather than defining that as doing good deeds is to release ourselves from worshipping what we have.

We are invited to remember generosity amidst a world that acts out of scarcity. We are invited to release those messages and feelings that create guilt, shame and fear so that we can live into the generosity of grace.

We live in a very individualistic society, and there are good things and bad things about that, but following Jesus is a way of faithfulness and fulfillment that invites us to also share in the collective. I am reminded of the African concept of "Ubuntu" which brings those together saying - "I am because we are."

May it be so. Amen.