

Riverside United Church
November 17, 2024

Scripture Lesson: Leviticus 19: 9-10; 25: 8-12

When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap to the very edges of your field, or gather the gleanings of your harvest. You shall not strip your vineyard bare, or gather the fallen grapes of your vineyard; you shall leave them for the poor and the alien: I am the Lord your God.

You shall count off seven weeks of years, seven times seven years, so that the period of seven weeks of years gives forty-nine years. Then you shall have the trumpet sounded loud; on the tenth day of the seventh month—on the day of atonement—you shall have the trumpet sounded throughout all your land. And you shall hallow the fiftieth year and you shall proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants. It shall be a jubilee for you: you shall return, every one of you, to your property and every one of you to your family. That fiftieth year shall be a jubilee for you: you shall not sow, or reap the aftergrowth, or harvest the unpruned vines. For it is a jubilee; it shall be holy to you: you shall eat only what the field itself produces.

Mark 12: 38-44

Jesus Denounces the Scribes

As he taught, he said, ‘Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and to be greeted with respect in the market-places, and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honour at banquets! They devour widows’ houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation.’

The Widow’s Offering

He sat down opposite the treasury, and watched the crowd putting money into the treasury. Many rich people put in large sums. A poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which are worth a penny. Then 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. For 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.’

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 - #3 - Reimagine”

On Friday, when I was driving somewhere I heard the CBC radio program the Debaters. It is a comedy show taped before a live audience and it was recently held at Centrepoint Theatre. The topic of the one of the debates this past weekend was “Save or Spend”. While that choice and debate over simplifies perspectives on money, I imagine that if I were to invite us to stand on a continuum of save is at one end and spend is on the other end, that we would be positioned in different places. On the debaters, the winner of the debate is determined by audience applause, and for the save or spend debate, it was determined a tie, because the applause was about the same for each side.

I have an uncle that would definitely have been on the spend end of the continuum and one of his favourite sayings has been “I have never seen a hearse with a luggage rack!” Other members of the family are much more on the save end. It is interesting how those attitudes and values about money get shaped and lived out.

There are a variety of factors and values that give shape to our money stories. As individuals, as families, as congregations - there are differences in our money stories and if we took time to reflect and to share than we might uncover some of the memories and messages that have influenced our money stories.

Today, we are in week 3 of a series on Our Money Story - the first two weeks were back in October and then we took a two week break - for the Anniversary and Remembrance Sundays. This theme of the series - Our Money Story - is a bit challenging because we live in society where we worship money, wealth and have measures of prosperity. In the context of church, we have absorbed messages that it is not appropriate to talk about money in church. And yet, just in case you didn't know, there is no heavenly pipeline of the money that supports churches. Unlike in some European countries, the government does not support churches financially. The model here is that the expenses of this community are paid through the offerings, donations that we make and other sources that we can generate.

One of the problems we have in our society is that we have subjects that we have learned that we should not talk about with one another - we shouldn't talk about politics, we shouldn't talk about religion and I would say that money is another. I think that conventional wisdom is in place because those topics are sources of conflict. But, what are the costs of not talking about such important aspects of life? How can there be understanding if we don't find ways of talking about such vital aspects of life where there is difference of perspective?

I think we can see on the news every night the effects of not being able to talk about that what matters most - power, values, beliefs, allocation of resources.

In this series, the first word for us to ponder was “remember” and we were/are invited to remember that generosity and not scarcity is the way towards living God's story. The second key word was “release” and we were reminded to release ourselves from the power of shame, guilt, fear and to practice release of debt.

Today our focus word is reimagine, and we build on the release teachings of the Hebrew story that as we heard in the book of Leviticus proclaims a year of Jubilee every 50th year, where economic relations are reset.

When we think of our societal and global money story, what would we re-imagine?

Since the American election, I have been trying to comprehend how the majority of the people - not just the required electoral college votes - voted for a president elect who has so little credibility on many scales of evaluation. And one analysis is that there is a global sense of unrest that has meant that incumbent governments have been voted out in many places.

The systems of the world are not working for many people. The gaps in income and resources are widening. The global economy means that there is little local control. And those benefitting seem to have little reason to see how reimagining is needed.

In our scripture today, we hear some reimagining. In Leviticus, there are two teachings offered and one of those is leaving the harvest at the edge of fields for those who need it or not picking all the grapes of the vine at harvest. There is a system built in where those who need it have access to what has been left. It is a social safety net, that enables people to have what they need.

And then there is the principle of seven year cycles of forgiveness and then after 7 cycles, the year of Jubilee. This teaching allows for debt relief and a reset of Sabbath. It is a reminder that the economic system serves the people, rather than the other way around.

Can you imagine the ways that that principle could make a difference in the unrest and despair of our world?

In the Hebrew teaching there are strong messages about the community's responsibility to take care of the widows. Widows in that economic and social system, would have had very little ability or capacity to provide for themselves. It is a reality and responsibility that Jesus would have been very much aware of. And so we hear his strong words of condemnation about the system where the scribes and the temple officials are exploiting the widows.

We hear those strong words of condemnation by Jesus and then there is a story about the widow who put two coins in the temple treasury and Jesus says, "Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury. For 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."

There have been many sermons preached on the great example of this widow. I have preached many sermons on the great example of the widow, but this time I have heard the story differently. Is Jesus praising the system in these words or pointing out the failure of the system that would convince the widow that this is what she needed to do and the immorality of the temple officials accepting the last two coins of a widow, whom they are supposed to ensure has enough?

I wonder what the money story of that widow would be. The money may be so rare that the

choice to spend or save would have been just fantasy to her. How would she have become convinced of the sacrifice she had to make in order to be faithful?

This story has often been used to praise her giving so sacrificially, and yet those who can give out of their abundance give so much less.

It's fascinating how in the money story of our world we have expected so much of those who are on the margins of systems without understanding how so often it is the systems that have put them on the margins to begin with. We judge those living in poverty for not having enough will power or energy and yet there are so many factors and realities that make it hard to move out of poverty. Our systems and our attitudes need a dose of re-imagination. Charity is important but maybe not enough to address the needs of those on the edge.

The systems of our world are not working for many people. The systems of our country are not working for many people. There seems to be a paralysis of imagination, of new ideas and possibilities. Maybe it is because we can't imagine because we don't have the practice of being able to talk about that which means the most - power, values, resources. We are confined in our partisan political polarities that we can't talk about political realities and needs and imagine new possibilities of solution and policy. The economic systems of our world are increasing the gaps in wealth and prosperity and yet we can't seem to find the ways to address the challenges of our time.

Should not the money stories of our lives be a means of enabling the people to know the gift of life, rather than the people being enslaved to the systems and false narratives of scarcity and entitlement?

We know that the verbs of our money story are not a simple choice of "save or spend." Perhaps we need to add a few more verbs to our story: spend, save, give, discern, tithe, remember, imagine.

We are invited to remember that our faith story has something to say to our money story as the values and choices of our lives are determined and lived out. So, let us remember, release, and reimagine as we reflect on the money stories of our lives and our world. For we remember that deep in our hearts there is more that we hold in common than that which divides us. Deep in our hearts there are common needs and songs, that enable us to live in gratitude and with generosity as we respond to the gift of life and the needs of the community. May it be so. Amen.