

Lydia Neufeld Harder, September 14, 2014
“Embracing the Future with Hope: Financial Implications”

In my conversations with some of you, I have threatened to preach a sermon about money—but I was never sure whether I would have the courage to do so. After all, money is both a very private thing in our culture—even spouses find it difficult at times to share with each other how they spend their money---and a very public thing, because we are part of a larger economic system over which we often feel we have no control. It makes us feel most vulnerable when we do not have enough money to meet our daily needs and most powerful when we are able to use it to pursue our goals. Love of money is at the root of some of the hideous sins we most want to hide, such as greed, selfishness, and envy but a generous sharing of money is also the most visible sign of love, compassion and community. How we gain our money and how we use our money is one of the most visible witnesses to who we really are as Christians.

But the theme of these weeks (Embracing the Future with Hope) has encouraged me to speak about this most sensitive topic—money and how we spend, hoard, save, and use it in our relationships with each other and with our larger community.

So I asked myself the question: How am I “Christian” in dealing with money matters? What does it mean for me to be a “shareholder” in this Christian community here at MFM—in a concrete way—that is sharing the responsibility and the privilege of decisions around money that MFM needs to make?

A few years ago, the church council at TUMC, the church where Gary was pastor, was wondering how to begin its study of stewardship of financial resources. They decided to begin with themselves. So they planned a retreat for council members and their spouses. They committed themselves to sharing concretely what they earned, how they spent that money, what kind of savings they had and what they gave to various charities. When Gary came home and shared this plan, I was rather upset. I was certainly not willing to go to a retreat and share my own finances so openly with the others in the group.

At first I did not know why this upset me so much. And then I realized that I found it difficult to talk about money because I was earning so little! I was dependent on Gary’s salary and though I was working part-time at the university, I did not have a job that paid very much. I began to realize that I was feeling some shame...I knew

that we are often valued by how much we earn—especially in a highly professional group.

Reluctantly, since I was the pastor's wife, I agreed to go to the retreat. We began by sharing stories of what money meant to us in our growing up years. What emotions were connected with money for each of us? How did our parents handle finances and what attitude towards money did they teach us by their actions? There were some among us whose parents had struggled to keep food on the table and so had taught their children to keep strict account of every penny spent. One person came from a single parent family and felt shame about being on welfare. She had vowed never to receive help from anyone, but to become as independent as possible. Other parents had instilled the notion of a tithe- that is- giving one tenth of their income to the church. Still others remembered how they had to go without many things because their parents were so generous to everyone else. One person remembered how all money earned as a teenager had to be given to the father who then controlled how it was spent.

As we then began to open our books to each other, we realized how our childhood stories influenced our attitudes toward money. Though it was not easy, I was challenged and surprised at how open we could become with our finances in this small group. We shared struggles about how much to give away, how much to save for retirement, how much allowance to give our kids, how much to spend on vacation trips. We also struggled together with what to do when unemployed or under employed or with the shame connected with some of our money stories. I can still recall the sense of freedom and support, I felt when my turn came to share my own sense of worth and the way that had worked itself out in the way I spent my money.

We all have money stories. So today I thought I would look at some money stories from the Bible and then add some money stories from my own experience.
Gen12: 20 b-2; 5-12

Abraham is a nomad with great riches of herds and cattle. He has been called by God to leave family and go to a new land where God will bless him. And Abraham goes, convinced that the God he is following will give him more land, a son to care for him in his old age and many flocks and herds of cattle to sustain him. In other words, he is sure God will bless him with prosperity. He is glad that a nephew Lot is going with him. And then come the quarrels between the herdsmen. These quarrels come about because the land cannot support both of them—their possessions were so great!

Like a good business man, Abram ask himself what to do in this situation. He knows that the best land is right there before him in the well watered plain of the Jordan. Why not ask Lot to go somewhere else, to separate his flocks from those of Abraham? But then something else seems to motivate Abraham. He decides that Lot should get the first choice of land. He values his relationship with Lot more than financial gain. And so he is willing to risk gaining less in the economic realm while keeping a relationship that he values. And it was then that God appears and promises him even greater blessings.

Is there anything here that can help us with our own financial affairs? I have learned much from some friends whom I will name Jake and Irene. When I first met them and went into their home, I concluded they were rich. Jake owned a seed and feed business in Edmonton and seemed to be doing very well. But as I got to know them, I realized that the decisions they were making about finances were motivated by something else than mere profit. Their home became a refuge for many, they freely shared what they had with others, including the congregation and were always ready to give in a practical way when a need arose. Gradually I also learned how their attitude toward money affected their business practices. Jake hired a young man who came from a very disadvantaged family. Because he was such a good worker Jake began to give him more and more responsibility. However, this worker could not resist the temptation to falsify the books and steal quite a bit of money. All this contributed to the bankruptcy that the company faced when the economy suddenly took a down turn. When Jake discovered what was happening, he confronted this young man but decided not to press charges. Instead he let this man go with some recommendations that would help him keep out of trouble. Jake sold his business and with a loan from some friends from the congregation he worked at paying off all his creditors.

One day a few years later, this man arrived at Jake's door again. He came with just the right amount of money to finish paying off all the creditors. He was now in his own business and had vowed to use his first real earnings to pay Jake the money he had taken.

Like Abraham, Jake knew that honest relationships take priority over wealth! And like Abraham, Jake's risk paid off in the long run—financially yes, but more importantly in the circle of friends that rescued him when he was in trouble.

Luke 19: 1-10

Zaccheus' story is somewhat different, though Zaccheus was also a wealthy man. However, he was in a profession that was seen by others as shameful, as deceitful and therefore one that no good Jew would take. But apparently Zaccheus had decided that he had to accept this job in order to gain what he considered most important for himself and his family. A good home and enough money for all the pleasures of life that he wanted.

And then Zaccheus met Jesus. His story took a complete turn. He realized that he had been cheating and needed to repay money he had earned dishonestly. I think he also knew that his shame was taken away—Jesus found him worthy and so he was able to hold his head up high.

The conclusion of the story is as written in Luke is: salvation has come to this household!

The story of our salvation can have much to do with money, since salvation has to do with repentance, with turning around and going in another direction. It has to do with gaining a sense of dignity because we are loved and considered worthy by God. Therefore we do not need riches in order to feel valued.

Another story comes to mind.

Our neighbour George was a poor farmer. He lived with his mother near our home and my Dad would help him with farming practices. But George did not like to farm. When his mother died he decided to find a trade—he became an electrician. He was very nearsighted with large ugly glasses. People assumed that he was not a good electrician since he probably couldn't see what he was doing. In church he sat in the pew among the old people, even though he was in his thirties, for he had few friends.

One Sunday night, my father came home late at night. He was deeply emotional as he shared that George had come to him and given him over one third of his salary for the year-- to go toward the mission work of the church! After hearing a sermon about God's love, George had decided that his life was not shameful but worthwhile. His way of giving thanks was through the money he earned.

Something had happened to George, and it began to show itself in more than his giving. George began to look outward to the community and helped where he could. Slowly he began to make friends and soon we noticed his interest in a particular girl. I remember George and his wife well in his later years, well-

respected, involved and always a neighbour one could depend on. Salvation had also come to his household.

III. Acts 8: 4, 9-13 18-24.

This story from Acts is much less known but probably is one that we should all read more often. Because the connection between money and power is one we all know about and the temptation to buy power with our money can be there for us also. Simon sees the power of the Spirit at work and wants what he believes is his share of that power. If he could lay his hands on people, he too would become part of the ministry and be admired as Peter and John were. For Simon was bitter and envious about all the attention given to Peter and John. He realized that his control over people through his magic was no longer a power that drew people to admire him.

What he did not realize was that the power of the Holy Spirit is always a gift—it cannot be bought or sold. Despite his baptism, his heart was not right before God. He needed to repent, accept the rebuke and turn from his own selfish ambitions to a loving spirit who gives generously, nor for selfish gains or for a control over the community.

This story has a sobering sequel in church history. Centuries later the church fathers write of the sin of simony—the buying and selling of church offices or privileges in medieval times. They remember Simon the sorcerer as a heretic and enemy of the church.

And many of us have heard the stories of radio preachers or TV evangelists or other leaders in the church who have succumbed to a similar sin. However, we can also see aspects of this story played out in the everyday decision of members of a church community. When our offerings or lack of them are attempts to influence the decisions of others instead of symbols of our generosity we too seek something that cannot be bought or sold but is always a gift. It is then that we need to read again our next Scripture passage about money. It is a story written in the first person. Paul is talking about his experience with money.

III. Philippians 4: 10-20

Just a bit of context. Paul is in Rome, in prison. He had been accused by the Jews in Jerusalem of being a “pestilent fellow, an agitator among all the Jews throughout the world, and a ringleader of the sect of the Nazarenes”. But because

he was a Roman citizen Paul has appealed to Caesar and has been brought to Rome to be tried there. Prison for him is not quite like we might imagine it. He is being held in a house in Rome, guarded the whole time, while waiting for the trial. Paul's food and clothes needed to be supplied by his friends during this time of waiting. At the end of the letter to the church at Philippi Paul refers to his own personal needs. From his other letters we know that in the past he prided himself on being independent, even as an evangelist. He earned his money by being a tent-maker, but now he is dependent on his friends. So he begins by thanking the church for their gifts which are sustaining him in his need. But then he reflects a bit on what he has learned in his life as his life is probably nearing its end. "I have learned to be content with whatever I have. I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is like to have plenty. In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being well-fed and of going hungry, of having plenty and being in need." And what is Paul's secret? One brief sentence: "I can do all things through him who strengthens me." His primary ability to be content comes from God because it is God who supplies every need according to his riches."

Yet Paul is not immune from moments of distress and worry. But he has a community that has shared their gifts with him, the same community that also received its very being as a church from his preaching of the gospel message. As Paul puts it in his letter, "no other church shared with me in the matter of giving and receiving except you alone."

Paul has learned that contentment comes from this rhythm of giving and receiving, both from God and from others. Right now he is on the receiving end, but he has also been on the giving side of this relationship. And perhaps his contentment, even in financial matters, comes because he knows he is not alone but both God and God's people are with him whether he is giving or receiving.

It was at the Mennonite World Conference which took place in Zimbabwe in 2003 that I received a whole new outlook on what sharing gifts in community can mean. The theme had been carefully chosen in light of our awareness that our hosts in Zimbabwe were going through a time of economic and political suffering: "Sharing Gifts in Suffering and in Joy." We as a world-wide body had chosen to accept the invitation of our African brothers and sisters. But we were unsure what this would mean for us who are wealthy in material gifts to come to this country. Should we not rather stay home and give more money to those who are poor? For their part, the Zimbabwean hosts were wondering: Will anyone accept our invitation? Or will they just pity us and go on with their lives ignoring those of us on the other side of the world?

The word “sharing” in the theme was very deliberately chosen. Sharing is different than simply giving or receiving a gift. Gift sharing is all about relationships, not about the gift in itself. It is about building up the inter-relatedness of the body, the church. Sharing implies that giver and receiver are connected through the gift. There is a mutual participation in the gift. Yet sharing is not about making everyone equal. Rather, it is about freeing and nurturing the gifts of the other through relationships. That is true whether the gift being shared is preaching or teaching or singing or food or money or computer skills.

We came to Zimbabwe somewhat aware of the needs of the people there. Bad government that had created a famine, money devalued 250 % in the last months, political repression and oppression of any counter voices and the devastation created by the AIDS epidemic in many families. And so we brought our small gifts to help alleviate the needs of our hosts.

What was unexpected was how our gifts were used to enhance the larger community.

- For example, our gifts of flour, sugar and food money was used to put on a feast for the whole broader community at the Mtshabezi Mission Station where we were hosted during Conference Scattered. Many of the villagers had not eaten meat for days, but were able to eat together with us as children, adults and seniors were served a sumptuous barbecue meal.

- Our transportation and lodging fees were used not only to meet our needs but to hire buses so that the Zimbabweans from the surrounding area could also come to the conference, despite the shortage of gas.

- Our registration fee was used to lower the price of registration for Africans so that some Zimbabwean families could come to the conference for the week and enjoy all the blessings of that experience.

In all these and many more ways, the money we brought was used to create what our hostess called an “oasis for many in the desert of their lives!”

Most of us from the North and West were only dimly aware that we too came with needs—a need to break out of our self-sufficiency and the contamination of materialism and greed, a need to find security in God and in our brothers and sisters in Christ. A need to live in the moment, relishing the joy of being alive. And

the Africans had much to give us in terms of their trust in God and their joy in every moment of life.

-There were the high school girls at the boarding school in Matopos who chose to stay at the mission instead of going home for the brief holiday. They sang for us, but then they also joined us in climbing the hills and delighted in showing us the caves with the ancient inscriptions by the bushmen.

-There was the music—so much of it, surrounding us as we sat in buses, as we waited for the service to begin, as we explored the caves. As we learned to sing and shout and clap and sway, our whole bodies received a gift of hope and joy that I, at least, badly needed.

I learned that sharing gifts means that needs and gifts come together and are used for the good of the larger community. This happened in Zimbabwe in a way that could not be calculated beforehand.

To be Christian in our everyday financial affairs means learning that our economic gifts are only symbols of the many and varied ways we can give and receive from the other. Our financial statements are a lens that reflects the quality of relationships among us. Learning the rhythm of dependence and independence in family and community is one of the great challenges of our capitalistic world. As I look about the room here, I know that we all have stories that include a response to money. I pray that as we reflect on our own money stories we may invite God to transform our stories and our lives so that our community and the larger world will know that we are Christians by how we live in relationship with each other.