

“Reimagine”
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This morning we enter into our 3rd week of our Fall Stewardship Series, entitled “Our Money Story.” Our key word for today is REIMAGINE. It is a topic that urges us to bring turn our consideration of our money story into a place where we make room for the Holy Spirit to baptize our imaginations—that we might reimagine a world where our social and economic systems are not built to disparage or impoverish, but to provide for and benefit all.

Many of us might be familiar with the Christian author, C.S. Lewis, who is known especially for his children’s series *The Chronicles of Narnia*. When I was a child, my parents read the *Chronicles of Narnia* to me. I loved it. My imagination took easily to the great Lion, Aslan, who is the Christ figure in Lewis’ stories. Aslan helped me imagine God and to love God, as I loved Aslan. But how many of you are familiar with the Scottish author, poet, and Christian minister, George MacDonald? MacDonald predates Lewis, but it was his wonderful little fantasy novel, *Phantastes*, published in 1858, that C. S. Lewis credits with baptizing his own imagination. Without giving too much away, because I would recommend the book to you, *Phantastes* tells the story of Anodos, who has just come of age and is about to receive his inheritance. Anodos approaches life with confident mastery and self-referent pragmatism. He is a person of strong self-esteem—a kind of typology of the ideal “man” of dominant western culture that feeds on the illusion of autonomy, control, and conquest. What is so profound about MacDonald’s story is the way it envisions what happens when such a person is ushered into the place of God’s renewal. Anodos’ journey is an imaginative exploration into the impact on one’s relationship with oneself, others, and with the Divine, when the Holy Spirit cleanses, reforms, and baptizes our imaginations again and again.

Friends, if ever we needed the Spirit to come in this season after Pentecost, and baptize our imaginations, it is now, when our world is so topsy turvy and it is around this theme of our money stories. It is all too easy for us to approach our money stories like Anodos: full of pragmatism, autonomy, and control. If you have been reflecting on your own money story at all during the past few weeks, or maybe on the money story within our church community, you, no doubt, know that we all still have more room to grow when it comes to aligning our stories with the story God is trying to write in the world and in our lives. Money is such an integral element driving the way of the world. There are so many values that our culture and our families carry around money, and they are not all from scripture. My prayer for us in this season is that the Holy Spirit would come and cleanse, reform, and baptize our imaginations around our money stories so that we can reimagine deeper ways to partner with God’s work in the world.

It is not easy for a church to really commit to doing the hard work of articulating a theology of money as part of Christian formation, much less regular Sunday worship. Take for instance our gospel text for today. How many of us are familiar with the story of the widow’s mite? We may

have heard it preached or shared as a Sunday School story in our younger days. We may reference it as our example of giving generously.

The story most likely left us with the impression that the widow's offering was a beautiful act of devotion—that Jesus is lifting up the widow as an example for us to imitate. And yet, apart from the text, if any one of us were actually to see, in real life, a poor widow giving the very last of her money to religion, would we not judge the act to be repulsive, be based on misguided piety, because she would be neglecting her own needs? Do we really think that Jesus would have reacted otherwise?

The problem with common readings of this story is how it has often been disconnected from its immediate context, where it is revealed that this is a widow whose house is being devoured by the scribes. And Jesus is condemning such action! So you see, Jesus isn't praising her. He is instead showing just how bad the scribes are. "See!" he says, in effect, "She put in everything she had, her whole living. And it was all devoured!" Jesus disapproves of this because it is abusive. He is not contrasting her as better than the scribes. He is showing how she has lost everything at their doing. And he laments this. His words might be translated like this: "One could easily fail to notice it, but there is the tragedy of the day— she put in her whole living." The poor widow had been taught and encouraged by religious leaders to donate. That is what we find her doing. And so Jesus comes along and condemns the underlying value system that motivates her action, and he condemns the people who conditioned her to do it.

Oh friends, what would it mean for us to reimagine our understanding of this story? What would mean for us to stop uplifting the widow's mite as a morality tale and instead see the condemnation of Jesus against broken systems that should be caring for the most vulnerable instead of devouring them? Maybe our work is to consider that Jesus is highlighting the corruption of the economic system in power. What if Jesus wants us to reimagine our community's money story such that the systems of charity that we are involved in, which may be failing to honor and uplift, can be transformed into something more in line with God's vision for just and equitable relationships?

Our two Old Testament texts, from the book of Leviticus, which most of us may not recall hearing many, if any sermons on, help transform and baptize our imaginations into God's vision for just and equitable relationships. These texts demonstrate so clearly that God cares deeply for the well-being of the Israelites, who had lived for so long under unimaginable conditions of enslavement. To aid them in the baptizing of their imaginations, God actually gives them specific laws or instructions so that they can govern themselves in such a way that they can make a full and complete shift out of enslavement and into a new and reimagined world that God intends for them.

God gives Moses instructions that radically reorient the Israelites' story around money—from a tool for self-security while impoverishing others to one where care is given to all, where each of God's children has enough. Isn't it remarkable just how practical and specific God gets with them? This is no pie in the sky theory. This is step by step instructions for how to demonstrate

love of neighbor. In effect, we see that God's instructions are a means of social welfare by which farmers were to leave gleanings for the poor. The Israelites are instructed by God to stop harvesting before reaching the farthest boundaries of their fields so as to welcome the poor and hungry living at the margins of society to take a share. And, if that were not enough, we see, like last week, the practice of Jubilee, when, in a fifty-year cycle, imbalances within the economic structure are rebalanced.

Church, can we reimagine how our church might today engage in cyclical years of Jubilee? Could we, together, ask the Holy Spirit to baptize our imaginations so that we can reimagine a relationship with money where it is actually used to repair rather than Band-Aid over or simply provide further security/sustainability to institutions?

May God's Spirit baptize our imaginations that we here at WPC might use our money in new and profound ways aligned with God's transformative economy. Amen!