

Live Like We Remember
Sermon 198 | Greystone Baptist Church | October 1, 2023
Exodus 16:1-18

In the Thursday email this week I asked you to remember your money stories. And because I don't believe in asking you to do something I wouldn't do, I also took some time to remember my own. I wonder how our stories might match up?

I can remember standing in the grocery store line with my mom and sister. I couldn't have been any more than five years old and I wanted some candy. Mom wouldn't buy it for me saying something along the lines of, "we don't have money for that right now." "That's OK," I said back, "You can just write a check." That was the day I learned that one has to have money in a bank account somewhere in order to write a good check. That was also the day I learned that our family's money was not an inexhaustible resource.

I can also remember the little brown bowls with the white lids we used to get in Sunday school, were they for the Lottie Moon Christmas offering? Ever the achiever, I always loved a tangible way to prove my devotion by asking my family, friends, and fellow church members for pieces of pocket change so that I could fill up my bowl and proudly walk it down the aisle when the time came in worship. That was how I learned that you have to give your money to the church.

Over the years I picked up on other stories - both spoken and observed - that formed and informed the ways I thought about money. What are the stories you remember hearing and observing (you know with words and actions)? And who were the people teaching you along the way?

Although the story the church most often tells about money is rather monolithic, derived from the book of Leviticus 16:30-33 which in a nutshell states that 1/10th of everything that the Israelites' land sustained or produced belonged to the Lord. Although *this tends* to be the only story we tell about God and money, the truth is, there are innumerable examples in our Bibles that tell the story of the multifaceted and interconnected nature of our money stories and our faith stories. In fact, some might argue that the entire story is both a spiritual story and an economic story and that one would be hard pressed to draw a clear line between the two.

Today's reading takes us back to the early days, when the people of Israel were recently liberated from the Pharaoh's slave quarters into the wild and unpredictable freedom of the wilderness. Here, Israel is immediately thrust into a whole new life. For generations all they knew was the steady balance of labor and provision that Pharaoh demanded and provided; but once their feet hit dry land on the other side of that Red Sea, the guarantees of Egypt were gone. Of course the story of Pharaoh and Israel goes way, way back - back to Genesis when Joseph is sold by his brothers. With all the layers of history and hindsight, we often tell this story as one of God's providence, God's faithfulness, and God's deliverance.

Don't get me wrong, these are stories of God's providence, God's faithfulness, and God's deliverance; but let us not be so fixated on these more spiritual terms that we fail to see that the very mechanism through which God provides and proves to be faithful is through God's alternative economy.

In the wilderness, without the certainty of Pharaoh's provision, Israel is reliant upon God's own provision. And it is in the wilderness of this uncertainty, that God teaches the people the rules of engagement. Whereas in Egypt, everyone worked around the clock, like hamsters running on a wheel; there was no time to stop, no time to rest, no time to enjoy the fruits of one's own labor.

No, every ounce of production went to increase Pharaoh's property and pantries - which apparently were relatively well stocked seeing as people came to him when famine struck the land. Yet despite all the evidence pointing to the probability that Pharaoh had more than enough, he was still plagued by jealousy, greed, and anxiety. This of course is evidenced by the fact that he had dreams - nightmares - about famine and starvation, and as a result he hired Joseph to help plan and manage the risk of those nightmares becoming reality.

It is from this environment, this culture dominated by an endless rat race of labor always trying to mitigate risk and minimize need by accumulating more and more and more... It is from *this* environment that Israel emerges into the wilderness. No wonder it took 40 years for them to be ready for the promised land. There was so much re-programming to do.

Y'all know how it goes when we have to be reprogrammed. We do not like it. It is hard. It is uncomfortable. It leaves us longing for the way things used to be. But these seasons of reprogramming happen all the time in the stories of our faith. In fact, they happen so much that we have a spiritual word for them. That word, of course, is: transformation.

Do not be conformed to this world, writes the apostle Paul, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. (Romans 12)

Although Paul may be the one who gave us the spiritual language of transformation, the evidence of God's transforming presence with us is present through all the stories of the Bible. And perhaps none are more significant than the stories of Exodus, when the people are at their lowest, most vulnerable point. So here we are today reading a story of wilderness and seeing how God transforms the Hebrew people from slaves of Pharaoh's anxiety to stewards of God's abundance.

In his assessment of this transformative experience in Exodus 16, Walter Brueggemann identifies three major lessons that underscore the movement from Pharaoh's economy of anxiety to God's economy of abundance: First, there is enough, but it must be shared... Second, the gifts must not be stored up - storing up resources is anxiety-driven, fear-based behavior. And third, in God's economy, there must be time for rest, aka Sabbath. *[even though this story probably isn't included in the over 2300 references to money in the*

Bible, and even though this isn't about tithing...]This seems like an important story for us to include in our collection, of stories about faith and money, doesn't it? These seem like important stories to remember as we, ourselves, attempt to write our own story about our relationship with God and how that impacts the ways we invest our time, talents, and resources... doesn't it?

It may not be a list of explicit instructions like the rules we find in other places of the Bible, but as we remember the story of the Israelites' transformation, their movement from slavery to promise, we also remember that we too are invited into God's economy of abundance - we just have to go through the necessary transformation.

And if we want to be transformed, we have to remember the principles of God's economy.

(1) there is enough, but it must be shared,

(2) the gifts must not be stored up, that's anxiety-driven, fear-based behavior,
and

(3) we must make time for rest.

The Israelites learn these lessons as they live in the wilderness, reliant upon God for meat, manna, and water. Though they may not have known it at the time, this experience of wilderness provision would become an identity-defining moment in their story - one they would remember and retell with ritual for the rest of their lives. This story has been passed down from generation to generation and *is still present* when Jewish families gather around seder tables - remembering the story of God's liberation from Egypt, God's provision in the wilderness, and the lessons learned along the way as God was transforming the people into *who they needed to become*.

So what are *our* stories? How and when are we remembering them? Who is teaching them *to our children*? And how are we honoring them with our everyday lives, and with our own resources? It can be tempting, for sure, to forget these stories of God's faithfulness, God's deliverance, and God's provision... *especially* when we are dealing with our own money. We still live in Pharaoh's economy!!

When times get tough, and I feel myself beginning to revert back to those old, acquired patterns of scarcity, fear, and anxiety about money, I always remember one of my own family stories, one learned from Grandma Tatum. *Money is just a tool* - she used to say. An important one, but not the only one. *Money isn't everything, it is just a tool*.

She was a child of the Great Depression, you see. And she remembered the days when everything really was scarce, when many people did not have the things they needed. Everyone worried about how and *if* they would make it through. But by the grace of God Grandma's family *made it through*, always with enough to eat and always enough to share.

She never forgot the story her parents told: with their words yes, but also with their actions - sharing generously, even in times of great uncertainty. That story of generosity *is* a story of faith - of trusting God to provide. Grandma and her brothers learned the story by watching their parents live it, then they taught it to their children by living it themselves. Grandma

was never the preach-y type, the transformation she experienced at home early in life, was clear in the way she lived joyfully and generously in every moment.

This is one of my “money stories”...

And I remember it when I begin to worry about what may come. Or when I fall prey to the scarcity mentality of Pharaoh’s economy in which we live, When that temptation comes, I remember the story that Grandma Tatum taught me with her example and with her words... “Money is just a tool”

And I remember the story of the Exodus, the freedom from captivity and the wilderness that followed... the ways that God provided in that wilderness, and *the economic lessons which are really also lessons of our faith*. These are part of *our* money story. The ancient roots of our modern journey from captivity to freedom... from scarcity to abundance.

So what story are we telling with our words? With our tools and resources? With our money? And with our lives? Is it a story rooted in scarcity and anxiety? Or is it a story of abundance and generosity? What is our money story? And I wonder... does it need to be transformed?