

But it's only a story

Why Jesus told stories about money
and why we should too

*There is no greater agony than
bearing an untold story inside you.*
– Maya Angelou

Everyone has a stewardship story

Dwelling in the Word – Matthew 13:44-46

The Kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and hid; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.

Again, the Kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it.

Monday

Read Matthew 13:44-46

In this familiar text, Jesus tells two very short parables, each beginning with the words, “the Kingdom of heaven is like...” It’s like someone who finds a treasure in a field, then sells all he owns to purchase that field; or like a merchant who finds a pearl of great value and sells all he owns to purchase it. In each case, the person who finds the item of value sells all that he owns to possess the most valuable of all possessions, which is the Kingdom of heaven.

Are we to sell all we own for the Kingdom of heaven? Probably not. So what is Jesus trying to tell us? Here, as in many other teachings, Jesus is simply using a figure of speech to make an important point. The purpose of all figurative language is to suggest a resemblance or link between two otherwise distinct objects and thus convey a larger and more complex idea. For example, a figure of speech we might use is “a tie in a soccer match is like kissing a dog.” Soccer and dogs are not usually linked together.

Some figures of speech are so over-used they become clichés, but we still understand their meaning. For example, we say things such as: “She is thin as a rail,” or “better late than never.” These figures of speech have been used and reused, but at some point, they were brand new.



Everence

In this Scripture, Jesus created new figures of speech to teach the concept of the Kingdom of heaven. In Matthew 13:13 Jesus explains to the disciples that he speaks to the crowds in parables (story) because “seeing they do not perceive and hearing they do not listen, nor do they understand.” Jesus was indeed a master storyteller.

For your reflection

- What figures of speech were prominent in your family of origin or are prominent in your family today?
- What lessons were being communicated through these expressions?
- Why do you think Jesus used figures of speech related to money and possessions when talking about the Kingdom of heaven?

Tuesday

Read Matthew 13:44-46

A more modern story is told of a woman who finds a valuable pearl in an obscure shop. The merchant says he will give it to the woman in exchange for everything she has. Wanting badly to own the pearl, she writes out a check for several thousand dollars, emptying her savings and checking accounts. The merchant asks, “What about your house?” The woman signs over the deed. “What about your two cars?” She signs them both over to him. “What about your boat and your vacation home? Your stocks and bonds, retirement funds and life insurance?” The woman transfers all of these to the merchant.

Then the merchant says, “Now the pearl is yours.” The woman is delighted! She turns to leave her treasure, but the merchant stops her saying, “Here is all that you have given me to purchase the pearl; I am giving these to you. They still belong to me, but I will let you have full use of them for as long as you live. The only thing I ask is that sometimes you share my houses, my cars, and other wealth with those I send your way.” The woman is overcome with joy, “Of course, thank you!”

“Remember,” says the merchant, “you may use these things as if they are your own, but on occasion, I will ask you to share them with others.”

The story of the pearl is a metaphor – a word or phrase is used as a way of symbolically describing a deeper meaning.

For your reflection

- What do you think the pearl represents? What about the shop, the woman and the man?
- How is this modern story similar to the one Jesus told and what added meanings are suggested about our relationship to God and the stuff that we have been given?
- What excites you about the story’s message? What concerns or questions does it create for you, your relationship with God, and the possessions God has given into your care?

Wednesday

Read Matthew 13:44-46

Today’s activity is to write down some of the phrases about faith and money that you heard growing up. We are shaped by our past and, consciously or unconsciously, we bring these “recordings” from the past into the present. Some of these tapes are good and others would benefit from some revising. For example: “Money doesn’t grow on trees” or “A penny saved is a penny earned.”

Maybe your family made up some of their own. One of my favorite lines from *Fiddler on the Roof* comes when the milkman, Tevye, says to God, “If money is a curse, may I be smitten with it ... and may I never recover.” Write down three to four such sayings that you may have heard growing up or that reflect the way money was used or valued in your childhood home.

For your reflection

- In what ways have these sayings shaped who you are – for better or worse?
- What new figures of speech would you like to govern your life today?
- How does the modern day story about the woman and the pearl impact you?

*Thursday***Read Matthew 13:44-46**

After reflecting on these two verses again, take some time to write out in detail or in outline your own “stewardship autobiography.” This activity has been helpful to people in illustrating the ways that ideas of faith and finances emerge from one’s formative years through their current life experience. Below are a few questions you can use to guide this experience. I am also including part of my own stewardship story as an example of what you might do.

Stewardship autobiography questions

1. What is your first memory of money?
2. What was your first major purchase?
3. How was money talked about in your home growing up?
4. Did your parents tend to be savers, spenders or givers?
5. Was there conversation about money in the home or church?
6. Where and how did you learn about money management?

Beryl Jantzi – My stewardship autobiography*Childhood experiences*

I was born the fifth of six children in Medina, N.Y. My parents, Marvin and Violet Zehr Jantzi, were fruit farmers and were eager to teach all their children the value of a day’s work alongside the importance of a strong faith. The Jantzis were charter members at Harding Avenue Mennonite, a small mission congregation located in the suburbs of Buffalo. This was a formative congregational experience for me and was the faith community where I made my initial confession of faith and was baptized. Early money/stewardship memories were:

- Fairness was a family value – divided up candy and other treats.
- My dad writing out weekly tithe checks on Sunday mornings.
- Hard work – quoting 2 Thessalonians 3:10 – anyone unwilling to work should not eat.

Dating and marriage

In 1986, I was introduced to Margo Maust, a schoolteacher living in Newport News, Va., and after dating for several months living at a distance, I resigned my position as youth pastor at Akron Mennonite to move to Denbigh, Va. We married later that year. While in Denbigh I served as youth pastor half time at Warwick River Mennonite Church and worked as a grounds keeper at an apartment complex.

- Started my first retirement plan through work.
- We agreed on an amount to give to the church which increased later in our marriage to a tithe.
- I made a cedar chest for my wife’s engagement gift/ring. We agreed an engagement ring represented an unnecessary expense and was not an important symbol for us.
- Advice I was given by an older woman at church after announcing our engagement – “don’t be cheap.”
- Our wedding reception was a simple affair with a carnival popcorn machine, ham sandwiches, cider, strawberry short cake – all which carried important family connections.

What is your story?

*Friday***Read Matthew 13:44-46**

In 1863, Johann Franck wrote a hymn entitled, *Jesus, priceless treasure (Jesu, meine Freude)*. It was later translated into English by Catherine Winkworth and printed in *The Chorale Book for England* in 1863. This hymn has stood the test of time and appears in many hymnals today.

Read the words of this hymn which are printed below and note how Franck takes the theme of this text in Matthew 13 and uses it as an expression of worship put to music.

Jesus, Priceless Treasure

*Jesus, priceless treasure,
source of purest pleasure,
truest friend to me,
long my heart hath panted,
till it well-nigh fainted,
thirsting after thee.
Thine I am, O spotless Lamb,
I will suffer naught to hide thee,
ask for naught beside thee.*

*In thine arms I rest me;
foes who would molest me
cannot reach me here.
Though the earth be shaking,
every heart be quaking,
Jesus calms our fear;
sin and hell in conflict fell
with their heaviest storms assail us;
Jesus will not fail us.*

*Hence, all thoughts of sadness!
For the Lord of gladness,
Jesus, enters in.
Those who love the Father,
though the storms may gather,
still have peace within;
yea, whate'er we here must bear,
still in thee lies purest pleasure,
Jesus, priceless treasure!*

For your reflection

- In what ways does your life reflect that Jesus is your most precious treasure?
- Write down several thoughts that have come to mind this week as you have spent time dwelling in the words of Matthew 13 and reflecting on the devotional readings.

Learning together

Parents are more prepared to talk to their kids about drugs, alcohol, sex and dating than they are to bring up an even more sensitive topic – money. A study of 2,000 adults, 630 of whom had a child younger than 18 years old, found that 32 percent of parents involved in the study were prepared to talk about drugs and alcohol and 28 percent were able to talk about sex and dating, but only 26 percent were ready for the “money talk.” Nearly all the parents believed they were primarily accountable for their kids’ financial education, yet only 29 percent described themselves as “excellent” financial role models. (*Money Talk Scares Parents*, by Marcie Geffner, Bankrate.com)

This may be your story as well. Maybe your parents never brought up the subject of money with you and maybe that in part is why you haven’t had these conversations with your children. Money is such a common tool and yet for many parents it’s a very difficult topic to address. This may be the reason the prophets of old and Jesus himself spent so much time talking about it. Jesus brought up the subject in story and everyday conversation. Jesus didn’t seem to be at all uncomfortable talking about money. What can we learn from Jesus’ use of storytelling that can help us talk about this difficult subject? Stories as a communication form get us comfortable with the subject matter and secondly, invite us to imagine applications of principles within the stories for our own lives. On the other hand, some may dismiss a lesson that comes in the form of a story. Unless a teaching comes outlined with three points and multiple cross references we can dismiss it as less than authoritative or applicable for life. If this is your inclination I would invite you to take a more in-depth look as we spend time exploring these four lessons of Jesus and learn there is more to be gleaned from this form of communication.

In a world that has become specialized and professional, there is one area where we are all experts. That one area has to do with our own life experience and convictions. The way we talk about our life experience and convictions is through story. Secondly, we can all learn from each other, whether from our successes or our disappointments. In the Thursday devotional, you were invited to write your own stewardship story to help better understand what has influenced your views – and your struggles – in this area of discipleship.

For group discussion

Take time to review together what stood out from this week’s devotional readings, reflections and activities. If people wrote down “tapes” they remember hearing from the past, have them share what these were as they are comfortable. Allow time for anyone who is willing to share parts of his or her own “stewardship autobiography.” How did your understanding of Matthew 13 evolve as you came back to it over five consecutive days? What would you have missed had you limited your reading of the text to just one day?

A stewardship story example

James’ current work of preaching, teaching and pastoral counseling in stewardship fits well with his lifetime commitment to the church. He grew up on a farm and with his wife, Betty, farmed for five years. Increasing involvement in lay ministries in Reading, Pa., prompted James to take a job that would give him more freedom and compatibility with church work. He sold meat in a farmer’s market in downtown Reading for a family corporation.

Because of James’ decision in 1974 to give his energy to the church in a variety of lay ministry projects, and Betty’s decision to remain a full-time homemaker until the youngest child was in school, the Martin family made frugality a way of life. They sold sweet corn from a half-acre plot and several hundred dollars of raspberries and other vegetables each year. Betty was a seamstress, which cut the clothing budget. James enjoyed golf, but opted for tennis because it was far less expensive, less time consuming, and Betty enjoyed playing. “A dollar saved was a dollar earned,” says James as he reflects on those years. “If we didn’t desperately need it, we didn’t buy it.”

In 1983, the year of a second ordination through which James became associate pastor of the congregation, the family's taxable income was \$13,013. Yet there was no sense of regret for having given their lives to the church. James completed a master's degree in church leadership in the 1990's and began working for Lancaster Mennonite conference in 1995.

Today, several years beyond the typical retirement age of 65, James shares Biblical and pastoral perspectives on stewardship and is a strong advocate of firstfruits giving throughout the conference. "We always believed in tithing," James says, "but we didn't always follow firstfruits giving. If we didn't have enough cash to give in the summer, we'd catch up in the fall. Then we attended weekend services in a local congregation led by Ray and Lillian Bair in 1992. I remember Ray saying that he would sooner see a person give a firstfruit contribution of 7 percent than a leftover contribution of 13 percent. I became convinced and have been emphasizing firstfruits ever since." For more stewardship stories go to www.mennoniteusa.org.

For group discussion

- What happens as we take the veil of secrecy away from our stewardship stories?
- Why are we so hesitant to talk about money?
- It's been said that money has a god-like power. Do you agree with this and if so, how does this power manifest itself in our lives?
- But these are only stories – does Jesus really expect us to take them seriously today?



Everence helps individuals, organizations and congregations integrate finances with faith through a national team of advisors and representatives. Everence offers banking, insurance and financial services with community benefits and stewardship education. Everence is a ministry of Mennonite Church USA and other churches.

Everence
 1110 N. Main St.
 P.O. Box 483
 Goshen, IN 46527
 (800) 348-7468
 (574) 533-9511

www.everence.com

Everence offers credit union services that are federally insured by NCUA. We also offer securities and other products that are not federally insured and are subject to loss of principal. All products not available in all states.