

The First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
“Alive in a Global Uprising: Private Investment”
Rev. Amy Morgan
March 19, 2017

Matthew 6:1-6, 19-21

It's like Christmas in July. It's like eating a Thanksgiving dinner on a Tuesday. It's like shopping for a bathing suit in February.

We're reading that scripture about money, and it's nowhere near stewardship season.

If it isn't bad enough that the church takes three whole weeks each fall to focus on how much we should give and why, now we have to hear about it in the middle of Lent, too?

We hate talking about money in the church. It's embarrassing. The church is here to help and comfort and support its members, so we hate to ask for anything in return. Especially money. Even in stewardship season, we emphasize that giving your time and your energy is just as important as giving your money. If you can't give much, that's okay. Do the best you can. We'll be fine.

The ironic thing is, you know who LOVED to talk about money? Jesus. That's right. He healed people and loved people and taught people God's way. And he still managed to squeeze in 288 recorded references to the almighty dollar. Or denarii.

So why did Jesus talk about money so often? A lot of people think it's because he hated rich people, or he was a socialist, or a communist. I could make the argument for any of those possibilities.

But there are other possibilities as well. For instance, Jesus might have been a venture capitalist.

I asked one of our Confirmation students a few weeks ago, who happens to be a strong supporter of free-market capitalism, for scriptural evidence that Jesus was a capitalist. And, clever guy that he is, he immediately responded: the feeding of the 5,000. Small investment compounds and trickles down and everyone gets what they need.

I'm still thinking about that one...but it made me reconsider the way we approach money in the church.

In essence, we do everything wrong. We ask you all, members of the church, to give money. But unless we're involved in a building campaign, we don't make anything with it. We don't recognize outstanding donors. We can't show you growing profit margins or increased market share. We don't even do a great job of talking about your return on investment.

But we're a church, you might say. It's not like a business. It's different.

Okay, but I'm not sure Jesus saw it that way. He told this parable about someone sowing seeds, and when the seed hit the good soil, it produced a hundredfold. One to one hundred is a pretty good return on investment. Jesus said the kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed. This tiny thing that becomes

something huge that houses flocks of birds. In numerous teachings and parables, Jesus talks about this small thing becoming great, like a startup company in somebody's garage turning into Apple. Small investment. Huge return. Essentially, said Jesus, that's what the kingdom of heaven is like.

The problem is, the church is terrible at communicating this to the benefit of the body of Christ.

There's a great TED Talk by a guy named Dan Pollatta. He's the founder of the AIDS Ride and Breast Cancer 3-day events and the president of Advertising for Humanity. He wants to change the way we think about giving to non-profits. He knows we're doing everything wrong. He says there's a double-standard when it comes to the non-profit sector vs. the rest of the economic world.

Non-profits, he says, are held to a different, constrained standard when it comes to employee compensation, advertising and marketing, risk-taking for revenue development, time expectations for return on investment, and market investment. In short, anything we label "overhead" is demonized in the non-profit sector, but in for-profit the motto is "you gotta spend money to make money." Pollatta says we "confuse morality with fugality," denying non-profits the opportunity to grow to the scale needed to solve huge social problems not addressed by the for-profit economy.

What Pollatta is proposing is not some Robin Hood economics of taxing the rich to help the poor. It's not socialism or communism. In fact, it doesn't involve government at all. His solution is much more radical and much more challenging. He believes we have to change people's hearts and minds, change the way we think and feel about what charities do in our society.

He thinks that the way to really change the world, to help people, to solve big social problems, is to give non-profits the same advantages as the for-profit economy.

But in the church we are shackled by scriptures like this one from the gospel of Matthew. Don't advertise your piety. Give in secret. Pray in secret. Don't invest in worldly things like your church facilities or staff or advertising or any other kind of overhead. Focus on heavenly treasure. You can't love God and money, so just don't talk about money at all. At least not at church.

It's like the church is this place where your bad choices are brought to light and your good deeds are kept in the dark. It sets up this double-standard where you are permitted to share your excitement about investing in Google or Coca-Cola, but you can't share your excitement about investing in the ministry of the church. So then you don't get that positive connection and feedback, which can lead to you not being quite as excited to give to the church.

And because the church wants to support you in your spiritual walk, we don't advertise what you give, either. Again, this leads to a situation where you get your name in print for being a top shareholder or startup investor in the for-profit world, and even in other non-profits. But in the church, your investment is a secret so your father in heaven can reward you.

Now, maybe some of us have experienced that reward. Our family has a strong commitment to giving to the church, and it's a meaningful part of our spiritual life. We've seen God working powerfully in our lives because of how we give.

But I will also admit that most days, I find it more rewarding to drive my new car or go on a family vacation than to give to the church in secret and store up treasure in heaven. Sorry, but it's true. I'm hard-pressed to feel more rewarded by God almighty than by the almighty dollar.

So what do we do with this text, and others like it, that seem to impede investment in the mission of the church?

Let's start by looking at the problem Jesus is addressing in this teaching. Jesus is calling out the hypocrites, which comes from the Greek word for "actor." These are people who are acting like they're following God's will, but they're only pretending. They strut the public stage, seeking praise and accolades for their generosity, but it's all a show. They don't really care. These charity shows were common in the Roman Empire and were a mainstay of Greek society. Being a benefactor was a matter of social status. You wouldn't think about giving anonymously or not being publicly rewarded for your generosity.

Now, the church today may have many struggles, but hypocritical giving is not one of them. I don't know any pastors who are complaining, "You know, I'm really tired of these people advertising to the world how much they give to the church. If our members would just quite announcing on Facebook that they are going to church to put their offering in the plate, that would be great. If I see one more Instagram photo of someone writing a massive check to our ministry, I'm gonna scream." I mean, this is just not our problem.

But it was a problem for Jesus in the first century. You see, around the first century, the Jewish teachers and leaders were busy interpreting the Torah, or law, in ways that encouraged people to be faithful in their everyday lives. Part of that interpretation included what came to be known as Tzedakah. Now Tzedakah can be loosely interpreted to mean "charity," but it comes from the same Hebrew root as righteousness, justice, or fairness. In Judaism, giving to the poor is not viewed as a generous, magnanimous act; it is simply an act of justice and righteousness, the performance of a duty, giving the poor their due.

So it would stand in opposition to that understanding of charity to give in a way that celebrated the giver, that brought praise or benefit to the donor. In fact, the Jewish rabbis eventually developed a merit system for giving, ranking different attitudes of giving from least meritorious to most commendable. Giving begrudgingly was the bottom rank, of course, just above not giving at all. Higher up the list is giving when you don't know the recipient's identity, but the recipient knows your identity. But higher than that is giving when neither party knows the other's identity. That whole "Don't let the right hand know what the left hand is doing."

But the highest form of Tzedakah, the most meritorious form of charity...is giving to enable self-reliance. Giving so that there is no one in need. Giving that addresses the systems of oppression and injustice that put some people at the mercy of others.

Giving that effectively addresses those huge social problems our society faces is the highest form of charity, of righteousness, justice, fairness. This kind of giving has no room for hypocrisy. You have to actually believe in a cause. You have to research effective strategies and best practices. You have to dream big and plan for growth. You can't fake this. You have to be a serious investor if you want to see

major returns.

I think Jesus expected to see major returns on investment. Something small turn into something great. And he knew it would take money to do that. When he said to a rich man, “sell everything and follow me,” it wasn’t because he hated wealth. It was like your stockbroker telling you, “put everything you have into this new Jesus IPO.” He had wealthy followers who supported his ministry on earth and helped fund the early church. They took their earthly treasure and turned it into heavenly treasure. They put their money where their heart was. They invested in what they believed in.

And I know that is true for many of you. You give generously, sacrificially, and privately. There is no hypocrisy in your giving. You care deeply about this church and its ministry, and you want to see it grow and thrive. You want to dream big, audacious dreams.

That is why we have enough pledges to balance our budget this year. That’s why many of you increased your pledges to support church staff and programs. You love this church. This is where your heart is.

We are one of those rare unicorn churches. We are a growing, thriving suburban mainline church. We are uniquely situated in the American religious landscape.

And we are ready to grow. We are ready to expand our scale.

But it’s going to take some investment. A grain of wheat. A mustard seed maybe. But a little more to produce something even greater.

It’s going to take investment in those things we think churches shouldn’t spend money on. Staff. Marketing. Fundraising. Infrastructure. Innovation. We may have to wait a few years for the return on investment, just like you would for any for-profit company.

And you won’t get your name on a wall. No trumpets to announce your offering.

But that isn’t what you all are looking for. Because you’re not hypocrites. This is where your heart is. You’re making that private investment.

Since this isn’t stewardship season, I’m not going to ask you to pledge. I’m not authorized to ask you to increase your pledge for the year. And I’m not even going to ask you to give over-and-above your pledge to a particular cause. I know that’s a shock given the theme of this sermon.

What I’m going to ask you to do is dream. If this church had all the money in the world, what would we do? How much money would it take to accomplish the biggest dream you can dream for this church and the community it serves?

Let’s not operate out of a sense of scarcity, but out of a sense of abundance. If the heart we have for this place can grow with the size of our dreams, I’m certain the treasure needed to support those dreams will follow. Because this is where our heart is.

Glory be to God, Amen.