

All the things you're not supposed to talk about

Acts 16:16-24

April 23, 2006

There are certain things you're not supposed to talk about in polite conversation. Things like ... religion, politics, sex, money. Well, we must not be very polite these days, because I do hear a lot of conversation about religion and politics and sex. But not about money. Money, my money, remains a very personal and very private matter.

Here, in church, we are quite polite. We don't talk much about sex or politics or money. But we should! We should because sex and politics and money, love and wealth and power, home and workplace and community, sexual relationships and economic relationships and political relationships, are the primary subject matter of our lives. If my faith in Jesus has nothing to say about the way I live most of my life, most of the time, then what good is it?

We need to talk, here, together, about the ways our faith is integrated into our lives as a whole. We need to talk about Jesus and politics, about Jesus and sex, about Jesus and money. Especially about Jesus and money, because money is the one thing we don't like to talk about anywhere, which is in itself an indication of how important and close to our hearts money is for us.

Money is a powerful force in our lives. Money is a persuader, a seducer, a motivator. We look to money for comfort and security. We put our trust in what money can and will do for us. And we let money rule our conscience ...

Paul and Silas are attacked and accused and arrested, not because they are lawbreakers, not because they pose a threat to Roman customs, but because their actions deprived some local entrepreneurs of their source of income. It's about money. It's about money, not about the welfare of some poor young woman. And this is in no way a unique case.

At the time our church was founded, American slave owners vehemently opposed the abolition movement, not because of a different interpretation of biblical anthropology, not just because they didn't want outsiders telling them how to run their lives, but because their way of doing business, their supply of cheap labor, was at stake. It's about money, not about human rights.

Our federal government has failed to address the threat of global warming in any meaningful way, not because the jury is still out, not because there is a need for further scientific study, but because any meaningful response to global warming would require major changes in manufacturing and transportation, major changes in the ways American companies do business, major expenditures of cash. It's about money, not about the health and well-being of future generations.

For thirty years, our presidents and members of congress have tried to open ANWR (the Alaska National Wildlife Refuge) to drilling, not because its oil fields will significantly enlarge America's energy reserves, but because there is money to be made there. It's about money, not about the value of place, of untouched wilderness, for its own sake.

Thirty years ago, I worked as a laborer, doing carpentry and installing home insulation. One of the products we used was blown-in urea formaldehyde foam. It was an outstanding insulator, but the industry received some complaints that people were getting sick because of the foam. My boss assured me that it was safe, and I chose to believe him, not because I reviewed the evidence for myself, not because I determined the stories of its detractors were not reliable, but because I wanted to keep my job. It's about money, not about worrying about possible health risks.

Now I do not deny the complexity of many of these situations. People do need to make a living, progressive societies do require thriving economies, economic benefits do need to be weighed against environmental drawbacks. But we must not deny the powerful, very powerful, role money plays in our lives, as a motivator, as a seducer, as a persuader, and as an end in itself. We must not pretend, as I believe we often do, that money is morally neutral.

We develop guidelines for investment that are supposedly value-free. The aim is to maximize return, not to pick and choose among investment options on the basis of any set of moral criteria. But any investment of money is an investment of power in the invested institution. Your money impacts human lives through the products or services that institution renders, through its treatment of its employees, through its support or non-support of the communities in which it operates. So any investment of money is by definition a moral act, a moral choice.

It is true that most companies do their best to operate within the laws of the jurisdictions within which they do business -- most of the time -- but their primary obligation is to their shareholders, to maximize shareholder profits. But their decisions and their actions make human lives better or worse. Their decisions and their actions leave the earth better or worse. Their decisions and their actions promote justice and peace or endanger justice and peace. So any business decision, any business operation, is a moral act, a moral choice.

Money is not morally neutral. Jesus told us that:

You cannot be a slave of two masters; you will hate one and love the other; you will be loyal to one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money ...

Money -- or *mammon*, in the original Greek -- is more than a morally neutral object. It is a power that competes for our loyalty.

Jacques Ellul, a French academic, theologian and a believer of great integrity, wrote this about Jesus' statement:

What Jesus is revealing is that money is a power ... Power is something that acts by itself, is capable of moving other things, is autonomous (or claims to be), is a law unto itself, and presents itself as an active agent ... It has spiritual meaning and direction. Power is never neutral. It is oriented; it also orients people ... Money is not a power because man uses it, because it is the means of wealth or because accumulating money makes things possible. It is a power before all that ...

We absolutely must not minimize the parallel Jesus draws between God and Mammon. He is not using a rhetorical figure but pointing out a reality. God as a person and Mammon as a person find themselves in conflict. Jesus describes the relation between us and one or the other the same way: it is the

relationship between servant and master. Mammon can be a master the same way God is; that is, Mammon can be a personal master.

Jesus is not describing the particular situation of the miser, whose master is money because his soul is perverted. Jesus is not describing a relationship between us and an object, but between us and an active agent. He is not suggesting that we use money wisely or earn it honestly. He is speaking of a power which tries to be like God, which makes itself our master and which has specific goals.

Thus when we claim to use money, we make a gross error. We can, if we must, use money, but it is really money that uses us and makes us servants by bringing us under its law and subordinating us to its aims ...

That Mammon is a spiritual power is also shown by the way we attribute sacred characteristics to our money. The issue here is not that idols have been built to symbolize money, but simply that for modern man money is one of his "holy things." Money affairs are, as we well know, serious business for modern man. Everything else -- love and justice, wisdom and life -- is only words. Therefore we avoid speaking of money. We speak of business, but when, in someone's living room, a person brings up the topic of money, he is committing a social error, and the resulting embarrassment is really expressing the sense of the sacred ...

Money is not morally neutral. It is a power that competes for our loyalty. Ellul goes on to suggest three ways Christians may keep money where it belongs and keep it from usurping a place that belongs only to God.

First, *side with humanity against money*. That's what the slave girl's owners fail to do. They take the side of money against humanity. We must resist money's impulse to put itself first in our minds and hearts, and not let our interest in money blind us to the interests of our neighbors. People always come first.

Second, *do not love money*. Money will compete for our attention and our loyalty and our love, but we must learn to practice disinterest and benign neglect. Ellul suggests we do that by refusing to depend on money to provide future security and by putting aside worry about having enough money in the present. God is the only one who deserves our trust, our dependence, our love.

And, third, *make money profane*, I like that one! *Make money profane!* Money all too easily becomes something sacred for us, but we must put it in its place and reduce it once more to what it should be, just an object, just a tool. And we do that by giving it away, by giving it away for useful purposes, to serve God and to serve the needs of humanity, by using it as a tool to express and enact our love for God and our love for humanity.

We tame the power of money over us by letting it come and letting it go with equanimity, without anxiety. Freely giving and freely receiving is the antidote to grasping and holding tight.

Dorothee Sölle writes:

If I cease to take and to give, I become a stone. If I blossom as a tree blossoms, I am in equilibrium of giving and taking. This is why the sentence "it is more blessed to give than to receive" is, in a profound sense, untrue and misleading. Perhaps we should say instead: It is more blessed to give and receive than to have and to hold. If my hands are fully occupied in holding on to something, I can neither give nor receive.

Having and holding is not appropriate to money or to any thing, but only to the highest and dearest of spiritual relationships. Having and holding is appropriate to marriage: *In the name of God, I take you to be my wife, to have and to hold from this day forward.*

And having and holding is appropriate to the higher spiritual union of which marriage is a but living allegory: *In the name of Jesus, I take you to be my God, to have and to hold ... forever.* So hold fast to God! Never let go! Give God thanks for all the good gifts you do receive, and freely let go of all the good gifts you are privileged to offer.