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Polite Conversations: Money

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Scripture: Matthew 25:14-30

So, a horse walks into a bar and orders a beer. The bartender brings the beer, looks at the horse and says, "Why the long face?"

Now, I start with a really bad joke for two reasons. Number one because with a bunch of sleep deprived middle schoolers in the audience, this is the scariest Sunday of the year to preach. So, I want you to be on your toes, but, secondly, it seems to me a lot of us have been a little long in the face lately, and we're going to talk about some really important topics over the next couple of weeks, and I want to make sure that even as we take life seriously, we never take ourselves too seriously in the midst of that. So, over the next few weeks, we're going to talk about some things that we're not supposed to talk about at dinner parties, specifically money, politics and religion, but we're going to talk about them here because – guess what? – we're not at a dinner party, are we? We're at church, and of all places, the church ought to be the place where we can come, and where we can literally belly up to the bar even when we have a long face and be served pint after pint after pint of God's grace, God's passion and God's understanding.

So, we're going to come here over the next couple of weeks even as the world around us seems a little bit upside down and let Jesus be the one to set it right. The aim of this series is to invite you to do your own thinking. You're going to do that anyway, but we want to intentionally, through the content of these few weeks, invite you to some specific thinking and always in light of scripture, experience and tradition. We want to celebrate the values that we hold in common as followers of Jesus and to use those as launching pads into all kinds of loving and courageous conversations but also to just drown out the vitriol of extremism with measured, thoughtful and faithful acts of courage. I hope you're up for this with me. I'm totally up for this, and I hope you're up for it with me as well. Let's begin by hearing some good news from the Gospel of Jesus Christ as it comes to us from Matthew 25.

(Danielle Jones reads Matthew 25-14-30.)

I'm going to invite you to take out your Inspire Weekly. We're trying to get you into the habit of writing some things down. So, we've actually created a space on the back side. You can fold it in half twice so that that little square on the backside is showing with some sermon notes because it's our hope, and it's our prayer – in fact it's our expectation – that you'll hear something or more importantly think of something in the next 30 minutes that you want to remember in the coming days.

So, as we turn to this passage, let's begin with a blessing. Would you pray with me, please? Gracious, loving and eternal God, use these moments, use these words, use our thoughts and our meditations to move us ever closer to you, we pray. Amen.

So, in looking to the life and lessons of Jesus on money, the first of the three topics that we're not supposed to talk about, I want to give you a tip, a challenge and an invitation over the next few minutes.

A tip, a challenge and an invitation. These might even be the things that you want to write down. First is a tip that has to do with how it is we might be more polite. Now before you think that might be kind of a soft and uninspiring word, remember that the definition of polite is having or showing behavior that is respectful and considerate of other people. Respectful and considerate. Respectful consideration of other people. Consideration doesn't have anything to do with money. It just has to do with how we can be civil with one another, and, you know with the Thanksgiving Holiday not too far down the road, I know that I need to do a little readiness, as my family's going to come together around the table. So, my tip this week is this: Listen loudly.

Now, to be sure. That's not a new strategy. We're taught from our youngest days to listen to other people. We have, as you know, two ears and one mouth so that we can listen twice as much as we talk, or, as I like to say, we have two ears that are open and one mouth that is optional. Listening loudly will mean that we hear things that we don't want to hear. If we do it right, we're going to hear things that we don't want to hear. The Apostle Paul, in a letter to his student Timothy, talked about a time that would come when people would turn away from sound doctrine but instead have itching ears. He went on to say that they would have itching ears to accumulate teachers for themselves to suit their own desires. You see, we can't have ears that itch only for the teachers and messages that suit our own desires. We have to have ears open to all teachers, to all messages in order to respond rightly. Now, I have a theory about why our listening skills have atrophied in the last few years. This theory comes out of my own personal experience – and that is that we have stopped talking to certain people in our lives. And, so, our listening has suffered. Or, at a minimum, we've stopped talking to those from whom we know we have different opinions – right? And it's easy to listen to those with whom we agree, but we need to listen loudly especially to those with whom we think we might disagree.

My oldest sister is someone I used to talk to every week. I haven't talked to her in a couple of months. She and I have gone in some different directions. It's been really hard. I'm going to call her this afternoon so that I can practice what I preach, and that's my challenge to you – to do the same. Think of one name, one face, someone you haven't talked to in a while, maybe specifically because you think you disagree with them. You might learn that that's not entirely true, but more importantly relationship will be restored. If we can build relationships, people, if we can build and maintain relationships, there is nothing we cannot do. So, that's my challenge. The tip is to listen loudly. The challenge is to reach out to someone you haven't talked to in a while. Have a question ready. Have some time set aside, and then just listen.

So, I want to shift gears, then, to the invitation for today. The tip is listen loudly. The challenge is to call someone you haven't talked to in a while. The invitation has to do with the first topic in our series, and that is money. Now, money is one of the biggest topics in scripture. It has always been integral to religious life. The Bible offers about 500 verses on prayer. The Bible offers less than 500 verses on faith, but there are over 2000 verses on money and possessions. In the Gospels one out of ten verses deal directly with money. Sixteen out of Jesus' 38 parables were concerned with how to handle money. I think Jesus knew, in particular, how much we would struggle with the place and the power and the priority of money in our lives, and I think that's why he talked so much about it. In Mark 12 Jesus talked about proportional giving when he pointed to the poor widow who gave what she had. In Matthew six Jesus warned us that we would always know where our heart is. Where is it? Where our treasure is.

Just follow the money. Luke 16, Jesus spoke of a choice that we would all have to make. He said, "You cannot serve God and wealth." You can't serve them both. You can't have two masters. On and on again. He just was really clear about some things.

Paul tells us later in Acts 20 that Jesus said it is more blessed to give than to receive, and the one that always sticks with me and something I love to pull up as often as I can is that life does not consist in the abundance of possessions. Boy does that swim against the grain of everything we hear all day long everywhere we go, but here's the thing, and I need to know that you hear this part of the message. Money and possessions are not in and of themselves bad, evil or terrible things. It's Paul in his first letter to his student Timothy where he says, "For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil." Have you heard that before? I bet you haven't heard that before. I bet what you've heard is that "money is the root of all evil." Raise your hand if you've heard that before. It's a terrible misquotation of scripture. That's not what he said. What he said was, "The love of money is a root of many evil things." Money, in and of itself, can do great things in the kingdom of God.

Matthew 25, the parable that Danielle just read can help us with a healthy and positive understanding of money and maybe give us a little language with which to talk about it, even if you're not ready to talk about it at a dinner party. Context is important to remember every time we go to scripture. Context. So, Matthew 25. There are only 28 chapters in all of Matthew. So, this will tell you that we're getting kind of close to the end of the story – right? And Jesus is using a parable here to make an important point. Jesus would tell stories. Listen, kids. If you like a good story, get into the Gospels. Get into the parables of Jesus. He uses stories to make a really important point, and that's what he's doing now, and he knows he's running out of time with his disciples, and he knows that he needs to make sure that he's really clear on things that matter ultimately to him. Now, let me just retell the story really quick in case you fell asleep during the reading or anything like that. Really quick. Speed parable here.

A man was going on a journey. So, he left all of his wealth with his servants. To one he left \$5,000. To another he left \$2,000, and to another he left \$1,000. He goes away. He comes back. He asks what they did with his money, and he wants to settle up with them. The first two servants each doubles their money \$5,000 became \$10,000, \$2,000 became \$4,000, and the master is pleased. The third servant, however, had buried his \$1,000 in the ground and had nothing to show for it but the original \$1,000, and the master is not pleased, demands an explanation and banishes him into utter darkness.

The first thing Jesus is telling us is about the source of our money, a really important place to begin. The source of our money. What was the source of the money? Whose money was it? This is not a trick question, people. Whose money was it? It was the master's money. Friends, all that we have, indeed all who we are is a gift from God. It is all gift. We are just the stewards of what God has given us, including our very lives. We are – I guess you could use the term – financial managers of the talents or the money that God has loaned to us. This is a really critical starting point in talking about money, and it's hard for us to hear because all – every one of us, including the guy you're looking at – like to think that we are self-made women and self-made men. Right? "I earned this money. I earned this degree. I got this job. I invested wisely. Me, me, me, I, I, I." You sound like a toddler, but the truth of the matter is that everything we have comes from God, beginning with our very breath, and it might be cliché, but it's true. We're not taking it with us when we're done.

I recently heard an interview with one of those estate auctioneers, you know, these people who will show up at a large estate, either before or after the owners have died. They come out to liquidate it – right? So, they have this auction. They sell everything. In this interview it's interesting to hear him talk about the fact that when he sits down with the family, he wants to make sure that they understand, and these are his words, "They're going to take their life's work and in about four hours, they're going to dispose of it." In four hours. A life's work disposed of.

In the end, I think what Jesus is saying is that it's not about what you had but what you did with what you had, which brings me to Jesus' second point in this parable. Not only what we did or do with it matters, but it really matters to God that what we do with it – it's not just that we judge ourselves or we judge others – it appears that God is judging us as well, that it really matters to God what we do with what we've been entrusted. You see here in the passage, it says, "Good work. You've done your job well." Does that sound familiar to anyone? If you open the NSRV Bible that's in the pews, as compared to The Message, which Danielle read, does that sound familiar to anybody? What does it sound like? Say it. Come on, you know what it is. "Well done, good and faithful servant." Say it with me again. "Well done, good and faithful servant." You've all heard that. Most of you have heard that in one context or another. I hear it all the time, and most especially at funerals. I think it's very interesting that I didn't know until just a couple of days ago the context of that statement. He's talking about money. Well done with your money. According to Jesus, we're being evaluated based on what we do with God's gifts.

So, how are you doing? Have you asked yourselves that question honestly? How are you doing? Are you "wake up in the morning and generous"? Or are you holding on to everything with clenched fists and a stingy mind-set. It's not only about money, by the way. I need to be clear. It's about time as well, the gifts that we have to share. Today is the last Sunday of our pledge drive for 2019. Dave and Katherine have done a fabulous job with the effort this year on behalf of all of you. Please extend your gratitude to Dave and Katherine along the way. (Applause from the congregation.) Or right now. I love it. Today is the last day of the pledge drive for next year, AND it's Mission Sunday, AND that's totally on purpose. Intentionally and simultaneously inviting you to share God's gifts through what we're doing here at Wayzata Community Church with your very best financial and with your time, the ways in which we can serve the world by just making a few sandwiches after church.

Now, did you notice the other thing that the master said? He says, "From now on be my partner." Now again, if we were looking at the translation that's in your pews, the NRSV, what that would say is, "You have been trustworthy in a few things. I will put you in charge of many things." You know what I love about that passage? Because I think about you students. I think about the fact that you have been found trustworthy. You're a little crazy. You slept outside in the cold, but you have been found trustworthy, and God is going to honor that and give you more to be in charge of. In fact, God wants to be your partner. That's pretty amazing. That's pretty remarkable. God wants to be our partner.

Finally, there's just one last thing, and that has to do with fearful living. To the third servant, the one who buried his money in the ground – remember that? - the master says, "Why did you do less than the least?" I love that. "Why did you do less than the least?" What a really important question for us. How

often is it that we ask ourselves, “What’s the least I can do and get credit?” Or, “What’s the least I can do and still get my name on some list?” “What’s the least I can do to meet the expectations of somebody, anybody?” Again, I’m just preaching to myself a lot this morning. What’s the least we can do? We should be asking, “What’s the best we can do?” Now, the answer to the question, “Why did you do less than the least?” – the master to the servant. The answer actually came a little bit earlier in the passage. The servant said (do you remember) – The servant said, “I was afraid.” Fear has a terrible and negative grasp on us. Fear always leads to less than the least, not to the most, not to the best. In the kingdom of God, fearful living is not rewarded. That’s Jesus talking, not JR, and he couldn’t be more clear. When you are afraid, you do less than the least. We’ve been tricked into thinking we won’t have enough in our lives. Every single one of us in this room who can hear my voice is among the top one half of one percent wealth in the world. That’s just who we are, but we are bombarded by messages that tell us that we’re not going to have enough tomorrow, and, so, we’re scared. We’re bombarded with messages that say we’re not going to measure up if this or that. So, we’re afraid. Easy to understand when we’re sold the idea that whoever dies with the most toys wins. Remember that little book *If You Give a Mouse a Cookie*? Raise your hand if you read that book to a child, had it read. Oh, good. I’m so glad that so many of you know it. Here’s the thing about that book. We’re fooled into thinking that we’re the mouse in the story, but watch what happens when we become the one that gives the mouse the cookie.

Well, this brings me, then, to the invitation. Then I’m done. So, the tip was to listen loudly. The challenge was to call someone you haven’t talked to for a while. The invitation is simply that you make a wildly generous gift to someone or to something soon – a wildly generous gift that you didn’t expect to give, except that I’ve just invited you to do that. It doesn’t matter where or when or to whom. Maybe you just outrageously tip a server that is so clearly stressed out in her work. Who knows why? Maybe when someone comes to the door with a cause that you’re just not immediately up for or aligned with, you give to them anyway. Maybe you spend 20 minutes right after the service and make a couple of the thousand sandwiches that we’re going to make. You didn’t expect to do that before you came in here today. Maybe you go to one of the tables that you heard about. The mission of this church is outrageously robust, and it’s just waiting for you to come and be a part of it. Maybe you can help us furnish the home of the new family that I talked about in the video. I found out over the weekend that they’re going to be moving into a new home this week, transitional housing. They’re going to need six beds. They’re going to need bedding. If you want to help anyway with that, just email me, text me, call me, and we’ll talk about how to do that together, and, of course, I’ll be in big trouble with our church treasurer if I don’t also tell you to make a pledge.

But here’s why. Watch what happens. Watch what happens in you. See how that unexpected, wildly generous gift makes you feel, and ask yourself, “What have I lost in giving that? In what ways have I been diminished by doing this?” It won’t exist. It will be minimal at most, but what will have increased is the faith and the hope and the promise of the one to whom you give the gift. And after you do that, I want you to imagine the response of the master – to you – saying “Well, done good and faithful servant.”

Let us pray. Gracious God, be with us in these coming days. Help us to be wildly generous in your world, to take the gifts that you’ve given us in the first place and to share them in ways that would

please you and inspire others. Help us, God, to follow you in all ways, and most especially in this day.
Amen.