

“Forward Through the Ages: How Can We Find Meaning in Money and Life?”

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March 18, 2007

What a glorious weekend this has been! The 50th Celebration last night was as magical as could be! I was so impressed and so proud of how we recognized the past but began to look forward to the future. Forward through the Ages, in unbroken lines indeed!

And yet ours is such a short story isn't it? 50 years, while impressive, is small compared to the 500 years of our religious movement, and that is small compared to the 5,000 years of organized religion. For us it is important because it is our history. And since local is the locus of our lives, we gather today to further that celebration.

Religion serves many purposes, not all of them about God (as I wrote in the paper this week). Religion, to connect, is about building community, finding meaning and forming a faith that we can rely on to keep us through the storms of life.

It is no accident that as we have celebrated our past and hoped for our future these last few weeks, we have been also talking about your gifts, specifically your money. Let me begin today's message by recalling another 'great religion' that has moved forward through the ages for a lot longer than we have; in fact let me talk about the penultimate king of Judaism, Solomon.

Many of you have heard of the splendor of King Solomon, the last in a line of great Jewish kings before the fall of Israel in the 6th century BCE. He was renowned for his wealth, gained from his legendary mines and his alliances with the mythic Queen Sheba of Africa. Solomon's throne was a splendid affair, laid with the jewels of the world, encased in gold, each of its seven steps flanked by mythic beasts. An oxen at the bottom, representing the passive nature of man; the owl, our hidden wisdom; the crow, our predatory nature; the lamb, representing our need to sacrifice to what is greater; the eagle a symbol for God; and the Dove, God's promise to us all. On the very top of the throne sat Solomon, God's son on earth, and the giver of wealth and wisdom. Solomon built a beautiful temple, laid with gold, lavished his court with gifts and prosperity reigned over the land.

What is not widely known are the myths by which Solomon gained his legendary wisdom. Legend has it that in his early years, young King

Solomon yearned for more and more power. After he had gained all the wealth of the world, he wanted all that was beneath the world as well. So he called the demons of his land to share with him the secrets of how to acquire the earth herself. The demons told him that only their master, Asmodeus, king of the demons, had that power, and so Solomon summoned the devil himself into his chamber. Asmodeus promised Solomon the very world itself, only if Solomon would give the devil his powerful signet ring which had the power to make him King. Solomon, ever greedy, gave the ring to Asmodeus and instantly was thrown from his palace into the desert; for the ring was a symbol of his power from God. Asmodeus, now on Solomon's throne had no use for a ring that would bring him closer to God. and so threw it into the ocean.

For many years, Solomon wandered through the wilderness begging for food and water. Finally, at a well, he met a beautiful woman who invited him back to her father's palace to be a servant. Solomon, king of kings, is sent to the kitchen. After falling in love and marrying this nobleman's daughter, the girl's father is incensed that she has married a servant and has the two banished into the wilderness. Nothing seems to be going well for Solomon. They wander for many months, begging for their meals until one day, while fishing in the sea, the gutted fish revealed none other than the magic signet ring the devil had thrown away. Wearing the ring, Solomon returned to the palace with his new bride and threw Asmodeus

back to the underworld.

The stories of the evil power of money are legion: Rumpelstiltskin, Midas's touch. The insatiable lure of wealth, we are told, leads us to only our basest nature. Solomon only gained wisdom when he understood that money and power have a dark side that can lead to ruin and despair. But treating money as only a dark force in our lives is too narrow a vision. Money can also be used for good. The question becomes, how do we see it? What meaning do we ascribe to money?

Money is, perhaps, the most powerful force in our lives. It is in everything we do: our living, our families, our livelihood, and of course, this church depends on money to carry us into the next 50 years. Our culture ascribes value to the bearer of money: rich people are more important than poor people, up to a point. As the story of Solomon reminds us, too much money corrupts our values and makes us less than human. Just how do we deal with this powerful force? And what does it have to say about our own dream here?

I begin with the observation that perhaps the problem doesn't lie with money, but with how we look at it. I know someone, very close to me, who sees money only as a tool. Money is not to be kept, but used. Money is only useful in helping others. How many of us see money as a thing to

be had? An idol to be held? As Thomas Moore put it, “The problem is not in having too much or too little, but in taking money too literally, as a fetish rather than a medium.” (*Care for the Soul*, 1992) Ask anyone who has inherited a great deal of money. Everything is great at first, but then you start becoming suspicious of people’s intentions, you start to worry that someone is putting one over on you. Money becomes that which you must protect. And likewise, if you have too little, you are always worrying about this thing called money. If only you had this much more this week, or if you won the Lotto, then things would be different. They would – for a while. The problem with seeing money as an end and not a means is that you end up caring more about money than what it can do.

Look at King Solomon. More money, more power only led to more desire, and ultimately to a fall, turning the very ones we love into the object we desire. Life has meaning with what we do with our money, not in having the money itself. This is not to say that if you are starving you don’t desperately need money, indeed, then and there, money is your meaning. But for most of us, we have something close to enough, at least for now, so what then? Then we should begin to look at our money differently.

The problem with money is not that we take it too seriously, but that we don’t take it seriously enough (see Jacob Needleman’s classic *Money and*

the Meaning of Life, 1996). What do I mean by that? What I mean is that money, while it should not be the end of our existence, should also be used to create meaning for us. Money helps us find meaning. After we pay for food, shelter, clothes and the like, our money, if we are serious about it, should reflect the values we embrace. Look at your checkbook. It tells a lot about who you are. Mine reads, gas, electric, mortgage, pizza, the church, clothes, a charity, more pizza, cash for living, the church, etc. What do you use your money on? I am not talking about how much money you have, just what you do with it. If you have a lot of money, then you might be using more of it on meaning making; if you have a little than you are using more of it on just getting by, making what little you have to spend beyond that quite important. I often comment that a hundred dollar donation here from someone struggling financially has a whole lot more meaning than a thousand dollar donation from someone well off (not that we don't want those thousand dollar donations, but what would it feel like if it were \$10,000!?).

Money makes meaning in our lives. Now if you spend it at the Gap or at nice restaurants, that does not mean that you have no meaning in your life; on the contrary, it means that you find meaning in looking well dressed and celebrating life. When the debate becomes interesting is when we look at what our money could be doing instead of what we are spending it on. I know a very generous person. People often assume she is

wealthy because of how much she gives away, confusing her generosity with wealth. In fact, she has less than most of us here. She will often hand the bum on the street her last \$20. When challenged for being too generous, she rejoins, “What would you have spent it on?” What would I have spent it on?

When we take our money seriously we begin to see how to use it in new ways. Money is energy. It’s not a thing to be kept but it is the symbolic power of your time and skills used to move the world. Billions of dollars flying around the world from one moment to the next, making things happen. When we see it as an extension of our energy, we can begin to seriously comprehend its spiritual nature. Remember, spirituality is our deepest search for meaning, to why we are here and what this universe means. Money can help us understand that meaning. The choice is up to you. What you spend your money on changes the way your world looks. Think about it. If everyone in the middle class gave up on one restaurant dinner a month and sent the money they would have spent on that to their favorite charity, it would generate 8 billion dollars a year! Trust me on this, I did the math.

Fifty years ago a group of dedicated religious liberals came together to build a religious community here in the South Bay promoting the values of diversity, reason and tolerance. Our beautiful church building was

constructed in the mid 1960's as a testament to the strength of that vision; open, inviting and modern, like our faith and dreams.

Over the years the building has been improved. In the early 1990s the congregation approved of a plan to renovate the hall and the patio, work that took some years to realize. Again in 1997 the congregation launched a multi-phase building process entitled "Project 2000" in which work to modernize and expand our facilities would take place. At the same time, through the generosity of those who remembered the church in their wills, we launched our Endowment. The purpose of which was to ensure a capital fund from which income could be derived. Through careful stewardship this endowment has grown to over \$800,000 in assets today.

With money from designated bequests and some of the funds from our endowment we completed Phase I of our "Vision" by the turn of the millennium. In September 2001 we launched Phase II with a capital campaign hoping to raise enough money for further renovations in the hall and classrooms as well as another building for meetings. With over \$400,000 raised from pledges, we have completed Phase II this last December. Much was done to update classrooms, offices, the hall, parking lot and bathrooms. Alas, the new building had to wait.

As you may have heard we now have engaged an architect to help us plan for the final phase of our dream; the building of new meeting space and further updates to the kitchen, bathrooms and offices. We are in the planning phases of this and it will be at least a year before we move forward.

The great triumph for this church is that, despite whatever disagreements we may have had along the way, the strength and love of the congregation has carried us forward through these fifty years to this exciting moment. Through the generosity of those who have bequeathed money to the church and the generosity of members present and past we have continued to improve our religious home. The Endowment is to be recognized for its stewardship and capital funds needed to complete these renovations. Individual leaders, too many to name, are to be thanked for leading us to this moment. In the final analysis, we have all had the very best interests of the church at heart, and it is that faith which has carried us here.

We now stand at the threshold of the next fifty years. Our Endowment continues to grow and provides needed operating income (over \$300,000 in the last ten years!). I hope that you will remember the church in your bequests. In the meantime, we need to live our generosity as we continue to not only improve our home but build on our ministry as we go about the work of bringing justice and peace into being.

This is why I am asking us to reconsider what money means to us today; before we become like Solomon in search of what is not ours to have, shouldn't we be first seeking what could be? To move forward through the ages from here we will need to continue to give generously, not only to our endowment, but to our pledge drive as we are doing now. Wow! A testament to who you are is before you: Over \$200,000 already. You are being asked to pledge your treasure (and later your time and talent, all three are important) towards the betterment of our community. Rather than it being an unfortunate necessity, it is a spiritual opportunity. You have the opportunity to put your money to work making meaning, for yourselves, for our children and for our larger community. Regardless of how much you give, your money makes a difference. As always, our goal is to have everyone make some kind of pledge. How much? That will be up to you; although we have literature and advice, the point is to be a part of this community. If money is an extension of our spiritual energy, than our money helps bring meaning to what we are about here. Because of all of you are here, we have been able to offer religious education for all ages that teaches understanding and acceptance. Because of all of you here, we have been able to move forward through the ages, to speak out and work in the community for the rights of all people whether they be black, white, brown, man, woman, gay or straight. Because of all of you here, we offer a place where people who have no place else to go can find a spiritual

home: from our youth, to our families, to a new Jewish group, a pagan circle and liberal Christians exploring the teachings of Jesus. Because of all of you, we are about to launch a ministry of social justice from here. Because of all of you, we have a community where acceptance is the rule and love is the standard. All because of you, your time, your talent and yes, your money. It simply happens because of you.

When Solomon returned from his humbled time in the wilderness, he was able to see that his money was not a wealth to be hoarded but a means to be given away. He had to sell his soul to the devil to find this out for himself. We are fortunate that we are not compelled to make such a Faustian bargain: we are simply being invited to share in the money we have and in so doing to extend for ourselves the meaning we assign to the live we live. And isn't that just quite enough?