Sunday, November 13, 1988
THE COMMITMENT OF GIVING (No. 3 in a Series: Commitments)
Deuteronomy 8:17-19; Mark 12:41-44

Several years ago, “Dear Abby” received a letter that began this way:

“I am a twenty-three-year-old liberated woman who has been on the Pill for two years. It’s getting pretty expensive, and I think my boyfriend should share half the expense, but I don’t know him well enough to discuss money with him.”

This letter reveals a lot about what’s going on in our culture. We see the admirable, ambiguous, perhaps even brave struggle to be “liberated,” the anxious turn to the wisdom of society’s “Dear Abbys” when things in life don’t seem to make much sense, and the hushed reverence surrounding the theme of money.

Indeed, money is, for many of us, the forbidden subject in our society. I recently heard of a couple, both psychologists, who would speak openly and frankly in front of their children about sex, death, and all manner of difficult subjects, but would go into the bedroom and close the door when they wanted to talk about money. It’s hard for us to talk about money, especially in church. People want to maintain a lot of secrecy about how much money they make, how they spend it, and what they are willing to give away.

Yet in the New Testament, Jesus spoke about money more frequently than any other subject except the Kingdom of God. He gave an unusual amount of time and energy to the money question. In the story read earlier from the Gospel of Mark, we are told that Jesus intentionally sat in front of the treasury and watched people putting in their offering. By design, He saw what they gave and discerned the spirit in which they gave. For Jesus, money, and especially the giving of money, was not a private, secret matter. Jesus was not afraid to talk about money with anyone.

Today, we are going to look at three things regarding money and commitment:

Why are we afraid to talk about money — why all the secrecy? What makes it, for most people, a forbidden subject?

We will examine the fact that money is a potent spiritual reality and has a power over us that is much stronger than we may realize.

We will explore some ways to break the seductive power of money over our lives so that we control money instead of money controlling us.

I. Let’s begin with the first question: Why all the secrecy about money? What makes it, for most of us, a forbidden subject?

We are afraid to talk very much about money, especially in regard to our personal lives — how much we make, how we spend what we make, and what we give away — because we have a lot of guilt about money. And we don’t like to talk about things we feel guilty about.

Some people feel they make too much money, others are convinced they make too little. However, very few of us ever believe that we have enough money. Some of us grew up during

the depression years and know firsthand the pervasive anxiety of scarcity. Because of that experience, a holding, hoarding spirit is almost instinctive in us, and the very idea of letting go of some of our money is frightening. Others of us grew up in an era of more affluence and have more money than we ever thought we would — or at least more possessions, two or three cars or more, other things we do not need — and we feel guilty about that.

We also don't want to talk about money because most of us are aware that we worship money too much, and we feel guilty about that. And this leads us to the second point.

II. Money is a potent spiritual reality and has a power over us that needs to be broken. That's why Jesus said such things as: "Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, for where your treasure is, there will your heart be also." He knew how easy it is to worship money. He also said, "You cannot serve God and mammon." And here, mammon means money.

Jesus was saying money is not something that is morally neutral, a resource to be used in good or bad ways depending solely upon our attitude toward it. Money is a power that seeks to dominate us.

When the Bible refers to money as a power, it does not mean something vague or impersonal. Nor does it mean power in the sense we mean when we speak, for example, of "purchasing power." No, according to Jesus and all the writers of the New Testament, behind money are very real spiritual forces that energize it and give it a life of its own. Hence, money is capable of inspiring devotion and worship.

It is the spiritual reality behind money that we want so badly to deny. But money has a desire for omnipotence in our lives. It is not willing to rest contented in its proper place alongside other things we value. Money wants to be supreme, and in many people's lives, it is.

Because of this, we attach importance to money far beyond its worth. We attach ultimate importance to it. We make money into a god.

Think of the symbols we attach to money — symbols that are unrelated to its real value. If money were only a medium of exchange, it would make no sense at all to attach prestige to it. And yet we do. We value people in relation to how much money they have. We dare to ask that question of questions that always reveals far more about ourselves than about the other person: "How much is he or she worth?" We want to find out how much money someone else has or makes because, in our society, money is a symbol of strength, influence, and power.

Or think, for example, how we let money dictate our decisions. Suppose my wife says to me, "Let's do this or that…" and I complain, "But we don't have enough money!" What has happened? Money has decided. You see, I did not say, "Well, dear, let's pray about it and see if God wants us to do it." No, money has made the decision. Money is then my master. I am serving money. Now maybe we don't have enough money to do whatever she suggests. But maybe also we can cut expenses somewhere else so that we can possibly do it if it is something we need to do.

These strange things make sense only as we come to understand the spiritual reality of money. Behind money are invisible spiritual powers, powers that are seductive and deceptive,

powers that demand an all-embracing devotion. It is this fact that the Apostle Paul saw when he observed that “The love of money is the root of all evils” (1 Timothy 6:10).

III. And this leads us to our third point. We are going to look at some ways we can break the seductive power of money over our lives so that we can control money instead of money controlling us, so that money can bring us closer to God and to others rather than separating us from God and others. I believe that the great moral question of our time is how to move from greed to generosity.

How can we do this? Here are three practical suggestions that will help us according to our Christian faith.

First, get in touch with your own feelings about money. Come to terms with your fear, insecurity, and guilt about money. Most of us are threatened to some degree by the subject of money. Some of our feelings may go back to our childhood days.
I was reading the other day about a man who remembered as a child having one ability that gave him unusual wealth. He could play marbles better than any other kid in his school. Since they always played for “keeps,” he could wipe out another boy’s fortune before the noon recess was over. On one occasion, he remembered taking a huge sack of marbles and throwing them one by one into a muddy drainage ditch and watching with delight as the other boys scrambled to find them. Through that single experience, he began to sense something of the power wealth can give and the manipulative ends to which it can be put.

Secondly, to break the seductive power of money over our lives, we need to remember that everything we have comes from God. It is not really ours in the first place or the last place. We need a conversion in our understanding of ownership. Remember what the Old Testament reading from Deuteronomy said earlier: “Beware lest you say in your heart, ‘My power and the might of my hand have gotten me this wealth.’ You shall remember the Lord your God, for it is God who gives you the power to get wealth.”
Maybe we need to stamp everything in our possession with the reminder, “Given by God,” or better still, “Owned by God.”

Thirdly, to break the seductive power of money over our lives, we need to become generous and joyful givers. We need to make a commitment to regularly and systematically give a certain amount of our money to the church and to keep that commitment. We need to put giving, instead of taking, first in our lives.
Regular, proportionate, cheerful, committed giving has a way of rooting out the tough old miser within each one of us. But it needs to be regular, committed giving, not just giving from time to time when we happen to feel like it or when someone plays on our heartstrings.

Becoming a regular giver has a way of changing us for the better. When we become generous and joyful givers, money, instead of being a spiritual power that has dominion over us, becomes instead a means of enhancing our relationship with God and with others.

Religious faith is bankrupt without giving. One person put it this way: “If your spiritual vitality seems low, if Bible study produces only dusty words, if prayer seems hollow and empty, then a prescription of lavish and joyful giving is exactly what you need. Giving brings authenticity and vitality to our devotional experience.”

Money as a form of power is so intimately related to the possessor that one cannot consistently give money without giving self.

Dr. Karl Menninger once asked a wealthy patient, “What on earth are you going to do with all that money?” The patient replied, “Just worry about it, I suppose.” Dr. Menninger went on, “Well, do you get that much pleasure out of worrying about it?” “No,” responded the patient, “but I get such terror when I think of giving some of it away.”

This terror is real. When we let go and give our money, we are letting go of a part of ourselves and our false security. We are breaking the power of money over our lives, and this is precisely why regular, proportionate, cheerful, committed giving is so important for all of us. It moves us from greed to generosity, and it changes us for the better.

Several months ago, someone asked me what I considered to be my biggest challenge as minister of this congregation. At first, I could not answer the question. But after thinking about it all during that day, I was able to say to that person many hours later: “My biggest challenge is to get the members of First-Plymouth Church to become committed, cheerful givers for the work of the church, and my biggest disappointment is how little, proportionately, some people give.”

So today, I am asking you to make a very specific commitment — a commitment to give a proportionate amount of money on a regular basis to this church. In letters to members of this congregation during the last three weeks, I suggested that you begin by considering 5% of your income, and I still believe that’s the right place to begin.

I am asking you to make a commitment not only because of what it will do for this church, but more importantly because of what it will do for you. It will help change you into a more generous and loving individual.

Do not be afraid to let go for a change. When you become a generous, joyful giver, you will always have enough left for yourself. Amen.