

Leviticus 19:9-10 ~ Mark 12:38-44
Our Money Story: Reimagineⁱ
3rd of 4 Sermon Stewardship Series
23rd Sunday after Pentecost ~ Veterans Day ~ November 13, 2022
The Rev. Dr. Laurie Brubaker Davis

Sermon

What does jubilation look like? Let's start with violin music and watermelons. Picture the young Ukrainian girl playing the national anthem on her violin with rubble and destruction all around her as Ukrainian soldiers entered a village just outside the city of Kherson. The sound of those notes, the sweetest music of defying the odds. Imagine the scene of Kherson residents giving out watermelons to Ukrainian troops as they entered their hometown that Russia had captured without a fight eight months ago. Kherson is a rich farming area of the country, yet, for the last eight months, these people had suffered without food, water, electricity. It was so bad there, only about 20% of the population was left. Russian troops had been growing more aggressive and detaining people there for very rough interrogations. So, you can imagine the jubilation, the explosion of joy when the Russians pulled out last week. Their city had been liberated!

The year of Jubilee was written into the covenant law of God's chosen people. As we heard in our first scripture lesson from Leviticus, once in the lifetimes of every generation (every 50 years), what might have been lost through debts could be recovered in the jubilee year. This law was like a reset button for the economy. A built-in reminder that the land, the capital, all that we have and are belongs to God: not the state, not an individual. This once in a generation reset was intended to provide three kinds of liberty: Liberation from literal slavery, liberty from debt, and liberty or release from the toil of cultivating the land. God's good earth also was freed from cultivation: the land was to lay fallow all year long. God's love and mercy lay at the heart of this jubilee legislation.

The Jubilee Year was a built-in, systemic pause that called everyone to reorient their money story. Whatever your money story may be, the truth is, we all like money. Yes? And we love the security it offers. And the things we can buy with money to feather our nest with self-security and self-importance. But then here comes God and God's dream for all of God's children. Care that each of God's children has enough. Sounds good. But how do we make that happen? What action might God be summoning us to take?

Let's consider what Jesus had to say about this. Jesus picked up this very theme, the Year of Jubilee, when he was handed the scroll of the prophet Isaiah, that day in Nazareth in the synagogue on the sabbath. His first words to humans in his earthly ministry are recorded in Luke's gospel, chapter 4:18-21: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed to free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." Every one of those phrases looks like jubilation to me. But the final verse 19, "to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor," he is specifically referring to the Jubilee Year. And then came his

one sentence sermon, the kicker: "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." In his very first sermon Jesus was proclaiming that his presence on earth was a new form, a very unexpected, unimagined picture of what Jubilee and Jubilation looks like.

This sermon was not received well, to say the least. His very own hometown homies tried to hurl him off the cliff right then and there. Of course, we know that in the end he was rejected, shamed, scorned and killed for his liberating message that threatened to upend the economic and political systems in place. "The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone! This is God's work. And it is marvelous in our eyes." In these words, from Psalm 118:22-23, the psalmist is speaking metaphorically. Jesus had just quoted this scripture earlier in Mark 12, connecting his life trajectory to this verse. In God's eyes, human beings viewed as unfit or rejected for one reason or another are being reimagined as the most important. The rejected stones make the best foundation holders. Try to remember this whenever you are feeling rejected or misunderstood. As The Rev. Dr. William J. Barber has written, "Whenever you see rejected stones becoming the focus of society, it is the Lord's doing."ⁱⁱ

Certainly, the poor widow is a prime example: A rejected stone alive with God's purpose and vision. Picture her in the margins of the temple that day, easy to miss in that big crowd filled with people putting money into the treasury. Rich people putting in large sums, but there she was with her two small copper coins. As a widow, without means to support herself, she was not even obligated to support the temple financially at all. The temple was obligated to support her. And yet, there she was giving "all she had to live on." Mark sets up this story alongside Jesus' critique of the hypocrisy of scribes, for us let's say church leaders, who make a show of being religious, who get the "center of the meat, cushions on the seat, houses on the streets where it's sunny," ... (Yes, I came of age in the age of the musical "Godspell"). Jesus is critiquing his own church and the ways it has strayed from "the year of the Lord's favor." And juxtaposing that critique with this poor widow. Clearly one of the rejected stones, modeled what jubilee looks like. She was defying the system, maybe even thumbing her nose at it, by giving a crazy amount. "everything she had, all she had to live on."

Never underestimate the power of giving one's all, despite the odds. Consider the Ukrainian victory in Kherzon last week. It seems to me, that the continuing resolve and resilience of tiny Ukraine up against the mighty Russian forces, is akin to the poor widow up against all those rich and powerful people in the Temple. She also foreshadows before Jesus' passion week that had already begun. Before the end of that very week, he would give everything he had and wind up hanging from a cross. That's part of what jubilee in God's eyes looks like. Through death comes resurrection. By his stripes, we are healed.

We started in Kherzon, imagining the Ukrainian girl playing her violin, from there we went to the synagogue in Nazareth, with Jesus unrolling the scroll proclaiming jubilee, the year of the Lord's favor. And then onto the Temple in Jerusalem, with the religious leaders, the rich people, and the poor widow. What about us here in Marshfield, Wisconsin. What does jubilee look like to us? As we look ahead to 2023 and are asked to bring our pledges forward next Sunday, November 20, how can that be a day of liberation and jubilation for each of us, and for

us as the body of Christ we call FPC? Of course, you may be thinking, "Oh boy! The Deacon Potluck!" That *will* be great cause for jubilation and delicious food and fellowship, to be sure!! Our first such event since we were shut down for the Pandemic, over two years ago. Let's talk for a moment about what will come just before that during worship. Next Sunday is our chance to bring our pledges forward and put them, not in the "treasury" but the little wooden church that will be placed right here in front.

These were mailed to you a few weeks ago. They will also be in the bulletins next Sunday. I invite you to ask God what you are being called to offer in the coming year that will help your money story to be in line with God's. Perhaps you already have it all figured out. If so, please reimagine, rethink, think again, in light of God's jubilee what you are being called to offer. You can fill in an amount per week or per month. There is also an option called "other." Perhaps God is calling you to think of an alternative way to align your money story with God's in the coming year. Feel free to reimagine with God what that might be.

Yesterday we held a memorial service here for Karen Ruby Zittleman. The outpouring of love and support for her and her family looked like jubilee to me. Out of sadness, grief, and suffering: love and grace rising up and abounding. Extra bulletins had to be made in a flash, more tables put up and places set for the overflowing number of folks who gathered. As I was preparing for this service, thumbing through one of her major books, she coauthored, *Still Failing at Fairness: How Gender Bias Cheats Girls and Boy in School and What We Can Do about It*, I heard the final chapter speaking directly to our call here today. Our call to let God help us reimagine our relationship with money in the light of God's dream for this broken world. She wrote this, "Dare to Imagine the world you want, a world of justice and caring. Imagine it. Meditate on it. Create that reality first in your mind. Envisioning your goal will bring the vision closer to reality... Reach out: There are others who will support you, who may as feel as strong as you do about social justice; Act: there are many levels of action, and all of them make a difference."ⁱⁱⁱ Preach it sister Karen, right from heaven to us today.

Every act, every level of action makes a difference: a lone violin tune; or just two small copper coins.

ⁱ "Our Money Story" stewardship theme was created by A Sanctified Art LLC, sanctifiedart.org.

ⁱⁱ William J. Barber, *We are Called to be a Movement*, (Workman Publishing: New York, NY, 2020), pp.7-8.

ⁱⁱⁱ David Sadker, Myra Sadker, and Karen Zittleman, *Still Failing at Fairness: How Gender Bias Cheats Girls and Boy in School and What We Can Do about It*, (Scribner: New York, NY, 2009), pp. 314-315.