

Release

Releasing is an important practice. We release things that we love. We release things that hurt us. We release things that we've inherited in order to pass them along to the next generation. Other times, we release things that need to die in order that new things might grow in their place.

Letting go is a spiritual practice, especially in the context of a society that teaches us to hoard resources and take more than we need. Last week our theme was "remember" And today we are remembering two passages that talk about "release" – one in the context of individual release, and the other, communal release.

In today's passage from Matthew's Gospel, a man comes up to Jesus with a very specific question. He asks him, "What good deed must I do to have eternal life?" Notice he doesn't say what do I need to do to have eternal life. Instead, he asks what good deed must I do to have eternal life. It appears that the man is looking for a simple answer. He wants to know the exact amount of pocket change he has to deposit in the heavenly vending machine in order to receive eternal life. He's looking for a simple transaction that reflects the economics that he has come to expect. If you pay for A, then you get A. If you pay for B, then you get B. Transaction complete.

But Jesus reply is certainly not what the man wanted to hear. He says, "If you wish to be perfect, go, sell your possessions, and give the money to the poor, and you will receive treasure in heaven, then come, follow me."

We have five verbs there and their order is important: go, sell, give, receive and follow.

The man in the story, as far as we know, only got as far as the first verb, go. And, honestly that's also the first reaction I have when I'm confronted with this story. I want to go, to leave it behind and move on to another part of the Bible that doesn't ask such ridiculous and hard things of me.

And yet, Jesus, time and time again gets right in our face and demands that we take a hard look at our money story.

Rev. Dr. Leah Schade writes that she is often tempted to reverse the order of these verbs in today's passage. Instead of "go, sell, give, receive, and follow" she writes that we are tempted to start at the end of what Jesus says and work backward. "Hey how about this? I can follow Jesus' prescribed sequence in reverse! 1. Follow him. 2. Get my heaven-treasure. 3. Give some money to the poor.

4. Sell off a couple of things I don't want at a yard sale. 5. Go happily on my way. Dusting off my hands of any guilt – I'm off scott free.”

When it comes to our faith, we want to follow Jesus first. But today's story reminds us that we've got some major work to do before we are allowed to call ourselves followers.

So, what now? What is Jesus calling us to do? I really struggle with this passage. I always have and I always will. I literally cannot just give up everything and walk away. The credit card companies and the banks will find me and put me in jail.

At the end of the day, I believe this story is about relationships. We have relationships with everything, people, objects, concepts, and yes, money. Ultimately, I believe that Jesus saw that this man's relationships with his possessions were keeping him from living fully into the relationships with his neighbors. When our relationship with money damages our relationship with our neighbors, it keeps from the Kingdom of Heaven. The man in today's story was in a toxic- perhaps even abusive – relationship with his possessions. They held him down. They kept him from embracing the communal nature of the Beloved Community.

Remember what Jesus said. He didn't teach us to pray “give me this day my daily bread” but “give us this day our daily bread.” When the manna fell from heaven, it was enough to sustain the whole community. Hoarding wasn't even a possibility but even if it was it would have been unnecessary.

The man in today's story clearly has much to release in order to free himself up to be a full participant in the kingdom of heaven.

But let's not turn this man into the “designated patient” so we can deflect from what this story asks of us. What is holding you down? Do your possessions keep you from being in relationship with your neighbor? Is my amount of wealth a stumbling block to helping my neighbor who is struggling to pay rent or provide food for their children?

What do you need to release to get the order of those verbs right – to go, sell, give, receive and follow? Maybe if enough of us take those verbs seriously, particularly the verbs “sell” and “give” we might just receive what we need to break cycles of poverty and unemployment. Because, releasing our obsession with, and dependence upon “more” isn't just an individual exercise; it's a communal one as well.



Our art for today is entitled, Finding Release by Lauren Wright Pittman and it is an acrylic, ink and watercolor on canvas. She says this about her artwork: As I write this in the midst of a global pandemic, we are collectively grieving countless losses and desperately seeking answers to quell our fears of what's to come. The economy is nosediving and many face grave illness or even death. some can't see past the fog of new living restrictions and are calling to reopen the economy because they believe it will save us. Others are choosing to stay home, risking economic fallout, to protect the lives of the vulnerable.

When afraid, we turn inward. I see fear and loneliness in the rich man. He's focused on an individual path, leading to his personal salvation, while missing the

full picture. The man's wealth may cause him comfort, but it does not exist in a vacuum. His wealth affects the lives of others – particularly those at the margins of society.

Jesus offers the rich man spiritual grounding that completely threatens his financial stability, but it's good news just the same. Jesus reveals to the rich man the truth that we are all connected. Jesus chooses to name commandments concerning interpersonal relationships and community. Jesus offers the rich man freedom from his entanglement with wealth, and gifts him belonging and a way forward. The rich man feels the weight of this truth. To “enter this life” he must recognize his responsibility for his neighbor, because our lives are interwoven.

Instead of grasping to Jesus' lifeline, the rich man turns away because he cannot fathom losing everything. His grief feels palpable in this time of upheaval. I meditated on his grief, laying dusty purples, muted greens and chalky blacks. I imagine the rich man isn't turning away from Jesus altogether. Perhaps he's taking space to feel his grief, processing all he will lose so he can truly find release.

We have talked before about how God provides the Israelites in the wilderness an economy that is vastly different from the economy of Pharaoh's domain. In Pharaoh's economy, he and his administration amassed absurd amounts of wealth on the backs of the enslaved Hebrews. Pharaoh wasn't the only thing worshiped in Egypt. Possessions and productivity were equally worshiped. And it was a self-perpetuating cycle; that is, until God interrupted it, defeated Pharaoh, and led the Israelites through the wilderness.

But it didn't take long for the Israelites to default to the economic model forced upon them by Pharaoh. Once a little time passed, the Israelites started to backslide to economic behaviors that God had saved them from in the first place. They quickly forgot the “daily manna” model that God provided for them. They forgot that God didn't save them from one ruthless economy just to deliver them to another one.

The Israelites began loaning money and charging interest in order to profit off of others among them. Those who couldn't pay their debts or even keep up with regular payments with interest were forced back into slavery. Land was taken from those who fell behind. The dreaded cycle of generational poverty started all over again.

So God, again intervened. God gave the Israelites a forced gift – a gift those who loaned money probably detested and a gift those who owed it probably celebrated. It was called the Year of Jubilee. Every seven years, all debts were forgiven.

Salvers were freed. Land that had been seized from those in debt was returned to its original owner.

God instructed the Israelites not to take advantage of this gift and do foolish things in the year prior to the jubilee year. God told them that this was a gift that would prevent them from slipping back into the idolatry of more, more, more.

You see, the jubilee year was another form of manna, if you think about it. Manna spoiled if you gathered more than you needed for any given day. The year of jubilee was a similar idea. Predatory lending “spoiled” after seven years and everyone was given a reset button. The whole community was released from the burden that they had imposed upon themselves in the time between jubilees.

Now, I know what you’re thinking. It’s a pipe dream. Its about a realistic as that man in today’s Gospel passage actually doing exactly what Jesus asked him to do and selling everything and following him. Sure, it’s a nice idea, but let’s be real, it’s not going to happen. He certainly wouldn’t do it. I certainly wouldn’t do it. Would you?

This sounds pretty radical. No politician in this country that I know of – either Democratic or Republican or even a Democratic Socialist like Bernie Sanders – would propose clearing debts every seven years. It’s just not feasible, right?

Well at the end of the day, I’m not a politician but I am a pastor. So I will say this: The difference between the economy of the United States and the economy of God’s kindom is that one is infatuated with the wants of the individual and the other is focused on the needs of the wider community.

Loving our neighbors as ourselves, that mandate that the Bible makes perfectly clear, is not just about being “nice” to your neighbor. The love that God compels us to show our neighbor is not a wishy-washy love. It’s not enough to just “not be a jerk” to our neighbor and feel proud of ourselves and call it a day.

You cannot love your neighbor, while remaining indifferent to their suffering, be that suffering mental, emotional, physical or in this case economic. Loving your neighbor means making sure that they have health care. Loving your neighbor means having the courage to say Black Lives Matter to make sure that your neighbor isn’t shot while jobbing or sleeping in her home. Loving your neighbor means releasing ourselves from our economic dependence on fossil fuels that are literally destroying our planet. Loving your neighbor means not just being nice to your waiter or waitress but also advocating for them to earn a living wage.

Loving your neighbor means being in relationship with them when they voted for the other candidate. Loving your neighbor means releasing the anger and animosity and remembering who we were before Donald Trump!

When I was growing up, I lived next door to my grandparents. My Grandfather was a staunch Republican and I was and still am a staunch Democrat. My grandfather was a Shriner and every year when the Shrine Circus came to town, grandpa would pose in front of an elephant and send the picture to me with GOP written on the elephants trunk. Grandpa was an artist and he drew a picture of an elephant and said “May the elephant be with you forever” and mailed it to me while I was in college.

When the Republican Convention was in Detroit in 1980, I came out of my house, and my entire windshield was filled with Republican fliers and stickers. Here’s the thing. Not once did I want my grandfather out of my life. Not once did I decide I couldn’t talk to him anymore. We had a relationship and even though we thought differently politically, we still came together as family.

Do you remember when that was possible? Can we get there again? Can we have a year of jubilee from all the hatred and anger and the division?

Loving your neighbor is a costly endeavor. It is. It isn’t easy. It takes commitment, it takes self-discipline, it takes humility and compassion.

But the cost of loving our neighbor, the cost of the economy of grace, releases us to other things. This country desperately needs a jubilee year because we have so much we need to release.

In the book of Deuteronomy, the release of the jubilee year allows everyone to relax, reset, and breathe! The jubilee year ends the rat race of “me versus you” and starts a new journey of “me with you.”

What if we moved the needle, even just a little bit, from our current economic model and closer to the model that God has given us in Scripture? How many lives might be transformed by such a release? How many lives would be literally saved from such a release? How might we change the definitions of worth and worthiness? How might our neighbors rejoice if the Church took the lead to fight poverty and not the poor?

The possibilities are endless, if only we release ourselves from that that weighs us down.

I close with a poem by Sarah Are entitled “But First”.

I want to practice being free
I want to unstitch my heart
from the edge of my sleeve
So that I can give it a life of its own-
A real chance to love and be known.

I want to practice opening
My mind, my doors, and window pants,
Anything with a hinge, everything with a frame,
Until the breeze carries through –
a new point of reference, truth and you.

I want to practice a holy escape,
Losing track of my minutes that turn into days
because the only time that matters now
Is time with you and this golden hour.

I want to practice release,
Removing the stones that weigh down my wings –
Stones of fear, shame and grief,
Stones that build walls between you and me.

I want to do all of these things –
Be untamed, and wild, open and free,
The first to give and the last to hold tight,
Because gratitude and clenched fists never felt tight.

And I am just starting to see
That this life is a river, a holy stream.
And if life is a river then God is the sky,
Touching everything at once and inviting us to try
Letting go of the raft, to float on our backs,
So that we and God can be eye to eye-
A lifetime of baptism and nothing but sky.
But first, you have to release.

Amen.