

Money: A Window on the Sacred

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Jesus recognized that in its complexity money enables people to work with contrasting forces that allow a fuller understanding of the Divine. Money's pervasive presence in daily life makes it a natural bridge to relationships. Trust and suspicion both reveal the footprints of Spirit . We give Caesar his due and honor God when we use money to explore both greed and generosity. The stories of the young rich ruler and the prodigal son recall that being accountable and being a thief bring us face to face with the Sacred. Jesus teaches the critical challenge is how we can best relate to the Source of all giving .

A few experiences in Christian community suggest working with these insights can provide a fresh approach to money. The stories don't provide categorical answers, but they do catch glimpses of that peculiar and vital combination of the objective and the mysterious. They don't exhaust the theme, but they do allow us to analyze the material without surrendering the important. The depth, width and breadth of understanding Jesus offers on this subject inspires exploration. They are gentle wisdom for a complicated world.

When I first began participating in the Seekers faith community they asked me to put a thousand dollars of the international giving budget to good use in El Salvador.

This gave me a bridge to relationship. I received this invitation long before I had contributed anything close to this amount of money. The community did not know how long standing or committed my participation would be. Before this event a mask of suspicion often kept me from direct contact with Spirit. In this request the face of trust helped me recognize the smile of the Sacred. This inbreaking of money

invited me to look at suspicion and trust as places where I could come face to face with God.

Over the years I placed several thousand dollars of Seeker's international giving in Central America. Eventually a church group made a pilgrimage to El Salvador. There a "barefoot " doctor practiced preventive medicine in the country side in some measure because these foreigners dared trust a stranger in their midst with a thousand dollars. That initial gift turned into an ongoing relationship of many dimensions. In it a few people of the United States and El Salvador give and receive from each other in ways that often bear the marks of the Spirit. This has helped many realize the amount of our pledge card is not as important as our ability to care for others. Cultivating a mind that does not grasp at either suspicion or trust enables a fresh state of giving that makes the experience of the Sacred directly available.

The greed of giving fascinates me. It frequently confuses the donation with the motivation. Too often I have seen churches grab their members by the guilt as they attempt to raise the annual budget or support some other good cause. Motivations for giving are often far from simple. It still amazes me that the more one has, the less one is likely to give. As I have worked with my greed I have come to understand I have much to learn about generosity. One Sunday I led a worship experience focused on money. Part of the Seekers community budget is a "Growing Edge Fund." This provides support to people who need financial incentive to explore an area of life where God is calling them to grow. I asked for several hundred dollars from this fund so that the offering could challenge us to experience giving in a new way. Instead of passing the plate to collect the weekly contributions, I invited people to take in cash whatever they felt God wanted them to use to

experience giving in some new dimension. This provided a reminder that God cares more about what is in our hearts than what we put in the offering plate. The size of our abundance matters less than the width of our circle of compassion. Cultivating a mind that does not cling to greed or generosity enables a fresh state of giving that makes an opportunity for people to come face to face with the Sacred. Our faith community expects proportional giving from its core members beginning at the tithe. This often intimidates . Like some of the stories Jesus used, it invites people to think carefully, and gently about money. If one gets beyond the daunting standard and the fear of judgment, the possibility of grace appears. Gradually this demand led me to consider money in a much more systematic and careful way.

A member of Seekers introduced me Joe Dominguez's money tapes. He invited me to listen to them and then send \$60 dollars to the New Directions Foundation. I listened to the tapes, enjoyed them, but never sent in my contribution. At various times in my life I have been less than honest about money. I now have a better understanding that I cannot buy or steal real solutions of life's problems because this community trusted me with and challenged me about money . I did buy Joe Dominguez and Vicki Robin's book Your Money or Your Life when it was published. It asked me to track how I spent my money. My wife and I discovered we could give more than we realized. Dominguez and Robin seem almost biblical in their invitation for people to use money as a springboard to examine their values, rearrange their lives, and experience grace and gratitude.

Being a thief and being accountable provide examples of how money can facilitate a first hand experience of Spirit. The size of our generosity is less important than our capacity to

forgive ourselves and others. Cultivating a mind that does not get stuck on right and wrong enables a fresh state of giving.

I'm not sure that our faith community would be any more comfortable than the Jews of Jerusalem if Jesus paid us a visit to share his views on money. He would still find tables to overturn, misplaced allegiances, and all manner of less than ideal behavior. We still talk about money with less ease and frequency than these stories suggest. In spite of a commitment to spend as much on others as we spend on ourselves, our bookkeeping is sometimes suspect on this score. But we do recognize Jesus talked a lot about money. Much of what he had to say was not popular among those who had it. Yet the pros and cons of money have the potential to provide us a first hand experience with Spirit. In these ways it is a window on the Sacred.