

“Looking Back”

This “**A Wonder – Full Life**” **Worship Series** utilizes two special resources – the “**It’s A Wonderful Life**” movie and the book titled, “**Integrating Money and Meaning: Practices for a Heart-Centered Life**”. We have already had some input from the movie resource. Among the insights from the book source, the authors quoted an East African Legend of King Sulemani and the Whale, it goes, “This fish was bigger even than any whale we know — as big as a mountain! — and it had an equally enormous appetite: it ate and ate and ate until it had eaten all the food left in the kingdom. And then it roared at the king for more!” Referring back to that legend, the book stated, “The image of a leviathan so enormous it can devour people, ships, even entire kingdoms, can be found throughout the world’s mythology and literature. In many of those stories (**Jonah and Pinocchio come to mind**), people exist inside the belly of the colossal beast, perhaps unaware of their captivity, much less imagining any avenue of escape.”

The author explained, “In my many years working in the financial industry, I’ve thought of this image often. Like King Sulemani’s whale, our money system — at least in the Western world — is truly colossal, encompassing every economic, social, industrial, and cultural structure that makes up our complex society. And like Jonah and Pinocchio, we exist inside this daunting money system, often unaware of how it surrounds us and affects not just our daily tasks but also our inner spirit and the spirit of our communities. I see the effect of living inside this whale every day when I interact with my clients around money.” **“People are worried, stressed, confused, angry, occasionally joyful, but more often fearful when it comes to money.”** The plethora of seminars, self-help books, and websites promising relief from this kind of anxiety attest to its prevalence in our culture. Unfortunately, this mammoth system is not going anywhere. In fact, each day it grows larger. The web of institutions and policies we’ve created to interact with money grows in complexity, lack of transparency, and the ability to create haves and have-nots.” The book’s author concluded, **“This web, in turn, props up just about every other aspect of society, including politics, the environment, research, education, religion, food, health, entertainment, art — the list is endless.”**

Obviously, for many of us, the whale of our money system is very daunting! Our movie excerpt focused on George Bailey’s struggles in his money whale! The movie summed up George’s situation through Clarence’s Call Experience as God said, **“There’s a man down on earth that needs our help.”** The wingless angel, Clarence, responded, “Is he sick?” God explained, **“No, worse, he’s discouraged.”**

In order for us to more fully understand the context for today’s Scripture Reading, let’s recall the discouraging whale – the financial setting and the reality in which the Jews found themselves during Jesus’ Public Ministry. First and foremost, the Jews were the oppressed and occupied subjects of the Roman Empire. Financially, they were subject to harsh Roman taxes. The Romans employed Jewish Tax Collectors, who were collectively seen by the Jews as traitors and unscrupulous. The populous hated the Roman Taxes and its Collectors. The Jews also had Temple Money to pay the Temple Tax and to make their offerings, so there was parallel coinage, which complicated the money situation. There was also Money-Changers, who for a fee exchanged the two types of coinage for each other. Furthermore, there was significant poverty and hardship, especially for widows and orphans. There were also very rich Jews, who were generally members of the Sadducees.

Among the traps the Religious Elite tried to pull Jesus into was about the paying of the Roman Taxes. They knew the Jewish population in general would not be happy with Jesus, if he said they had to pay Taxes to Rome. The Religious Establishment also knew Jesus would get into trouble with the Roman Government, if he curried favor with the people and spoke against paying Roman Taxes. So, they thought they had the perfect trick question to ask Jesus, which would either result in him becoming unpopular with the people or being in danger of arrest by the Romans. **In verse 17 of our Scripture Reading, Matthew**

reported the Pharisees and their allies asked Jesus, “Tell us, then, what do you think? Is it against our Law to pay taxes to the Roman Emperor, or not?”

Their plan was not successful for it was reported in **verses 18 and 19**, “**Jesus, however, was aware of their evil plan, and so he said, ‘You hypocrites! Why are you trying to trap me? Show me the coin for paying the tax!’**”

After they showed him the Roman coin used to pay the Roman Taxes, Jesus asked whose face was on it and they told him it was the face of the Emperor of Rome. We are told in **verse 21b**, “**Jesus said to them, ‘Well, then, pay to the Emperor what belongs to the Emperor, and pay to God what belongs to God.’**” Unlike the way we pay taxes in the United States, paying the Emperor – the head of the Roman Government and paying the Roman Government were synonymous.

Jesus’ answer avoided the trap set for him by the Jewish Religious and Political Establishment. His answer could not have been a good reason for him to be arrested by the Romans. His answer did not bother the populous because they knew Jesus believed everything belongs to God, so that our Divine Parent has priority.

As Jesus answered the trick question by helping the people get back in touch with the reality of their responsibilities to Rome and to God, so each of us needs to look back and to decide for ourselves how we see the Whale of our financial reality. Our Monetary System is very complex. Our Tax System is complicated and daunting. During the past few decades, the income gap disparity has grown between the rich, the comfortable, and the poor. The vast majority of people living in the United States have very little in savings and live from paycheck to paycheck. Homelessness and hunger are substantial. Health care is very problematical for many because they cannot afford experiencing a significant illness. It looks like some major aspects of our economy are slowing down. All of that encourages most people to be apprehensive and/or afraid that their financial lives could easily be destroyed.

Those fears of total ruin are not likely to be fulfilled but there are enough memories and examples of persons, who have suffered ruin, that it is easy to let those fears lead us to live self-destructively. Our relationships, health, mental state, financial well-being, and spiritual life hang in the balance when we allow those fears to control us. **It is crucial we remember All People and All Things Belong to God and that we look back on God’s Constant Agape Love for us in the past, especially as shown in Jesus Christ.** God’s Loving Presence is far more powerful than fear and greed. We benefit greatly when we put our trust and faith in God’s Loving Presence and Help!

When you look back at the history of the Whale we are in – our financial world and your experiences with money, **how do you see yourself?**

→**Are you letting fear control you or are you able to move forward with generosity?**

→**From whom did you learn how to think about your financial life the way you do it?** Was it your Mother or Father or a Grandparent?

→**Where does God fit in your Financial Universe?** How do you see your Divine Parent involved in your financial life and your life as a whole?

After looking back – coming to terms with our financial world – the Whale and our experiences and our beliefs about our own financial lives, let us put our trust and faith in God’s Constant Agape Loving Presence, so we will not fall prey to the powers of fear and greed. **Following Jesus’ Example and Teachings – knowing All Belongs to God, we will be Wonder – Full – amazed at the greatness and power of God’s Agape Love for us!** We will be on the path to the Wonder – Full Life with God, one another, and All People. Amen.