

Life in the Belly of a Whale **(Reflection by Rev. Peggy McDonagh, February 2, 2020)**

A while back I heard about a minister who was eager to help her congregation balance its budget. She decided to be creative about her approach. One beautiful Sunday morning, she announced to her congregation: “My good people, I have here in my hands three sermons a \$1000 sermon that lasts five minutes, a \$500 sermon that lasts fifteen minutes, and a \$100 sermon that lasts a full hour. Now before the sermon, we’ll take the collection and see which one I’ll deliver.”

My friends, today I am stepping out on a precarious limb and beginning a series entitled “A Wonder-Full Life” which partly focuses on our relationship with money. Discussions about taxes and money are topics that people avoid outside the church and within it. As I was preparing this series, there were many sleepless nights because I know that people do not like to talk about money, and I was anxious about whether you, the congregation, would be open to the theme.

I decided to be courageous and present this series because I learned so much as I prepared it. This series takes us on a spiritual journey that allows us to discover how money can be a valued and important part of our spiritual lives, rather than a reality of life that we think should exist outside of them. When we take a courageous look at our relationship with money as part of our spiritual journey, we may discover new depths of meaning, healing and wholeness, and a renewed “outlook” on what constitutes a wonderful life. I invite us to embark on this journey together so we can reaffirm what is essential in life and celebrate all that is Wonder-Full.

Be assured the reflection will not last one hour or five minutes. I’m offering the \$500 or 15 minute version. This series, written by Dr. Marcia McFee, is based on the movie “It’s a Wonderful Life,” and a book entitled, *Integrating Money and Meaning: Practices for a Heart - Centered Life* by Maggie Kulyk. “It’s a Wonderful Life” is a classic film that many of us have seen. I wonder how many of us realize that this movie about how financial crisis creates vastly diverse reactions from several of the movie’s characters. The overarching theme is how money distorts people’s perception of what

is important in life and that is particularly true for the main character, George Bailey.

The movie starts with God making arrangements to send an angel to assist Mr. Bailey. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=79pluurpNARs>

What is George Bailey discouraged about? His life seems to be collapsing around him because there is an \$8000 deposit missing from his business's bank account, putting the building and loan company that he has invested his life in jeopardy. A loss of \$8000 would be hard for many of us to withstand today, but this film is from 1946. \$8 000 today would amount to \$110 430.

George Bailey was a man who seemed to have his priorities in order and liked to help people, but money controlled him, bringing him to the brink of utter despair. Like George, many people lose sight of what is important in life. The Wonder-Full Life series enables us to reconnect with what is important as we live in a world in which people are consumed and controlled by money and power.

The book *Integrating Money and Meaning begins* begins with an East African Legend. King Sulemani asks God's permission to feed the whole world with his corn, presuming that if he feeds the entire world, he will wield great power. God responds by sending a huge fish who eats all the corn. The myth tells how "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!"

The mythological creature, Leviathan, who is so enormous it can devour people, ships and even entire kingdoms, can be found throughout the world's mythology and literature. Think of the stories of Jonah and Pinocchio who are swallowed by a colossal beast and subsequently live in its belly. In some legends, those consumed by the creature are unaware that they are held captive with no avenues of escape.

Maggie Kulyk, who works in the financial industry, uses this metaphor to describe the money system that shapes the Western world, a system that she suggests is "colossal, encompassing every economic, social, industrial and cultural structure that mess up our complex society." Just

like Pinocchio and Jonah, “We all 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.”

Kulyk comments on how she sees “the effects of living inside this whale every day” when she talks with her clients. “People are worried, stressed, confused, angry, occasionally joyful, but more often fearful when it comes to money.”

She points out that this “mammoth system grows larger as the webs of institutions and policies people create to interact with money grow in complexity, lack of transparency and the ability to create have and have-nots.” Every aspect of an individual life, rich or poor is affected and every part of society is affected, including politics, the environment, research, education, religion, food, health, entertainment, art — the list is endless.

This image of living within the belly of a colossal system of money is frightening and concerning. We all feel the effects of this system that controls our lives and determines our relationship with money. We are pulled in all directions by this system that convinces us to spend, to hoard, to feel deserving, to accumulate, to fear not having enough and to panic when our financial situation changes. It is understandable why many people are fearful, concerned and anxious, depressed, stressed, and feel powerless. Many of us remain entirely unaware of the belly in which we live and the magnitude, power and control that holds us captive. “We value money because it helps us survive,” says Kulyk, “but simultaneously we are disconnected from the reality of where our money is going and what it is doing..

We treat the natural world as if it were an indestructible and infinite ATM machine on which to draw — and our monetary system embraces this kind of false accounting system.” And this mammoth “monetary system disconnects from our place in the natural world.”

In the movie, everyone lived in the belly of the money system of the time, utterly disconnected from what was important in life. George Bailey because so disconnected that he wanted to commit suicide.

Just as Kulyk raises awareness about people’s relationship with money in her book, so too did Jesus raise awareness of how people were controlled

by money in his day. Many of his teachings and parables were about money and its power to devalue and destroy. In the reading, we heard how the Pharisees were trying to manipulate Jesus. Their questions would either make the Jews mad because he might answer in a way that indicates collusion with Rome or respond in a way that puts himself in the position of jeopardy with the Romans for suggesting that taxes should not be paid.

Jesus' answer appears complicated but puts money into perspective. Like us, people in the day lived within the belly of an oppressive monetary system and the oppressors, the Romans, had all the power to control money and take it as they pleased. Everyone, including Jesus, lived within the control of the oppressive system, but Jesus responds to the question surprisingly. He says, "Give to God what belongs to God." In effect, Jesus placed people's decisions regarding money within the spiritual realm. Jesus is advising people to make decisions about their money from a spiritual place rather than allow those decisions to be dictated by the environment in which they lived. People's decisions about how they manage their money must be in live with God's will.

Like the people in Jesus' day, we live in the belly of the whale. How we choose to live in the valley can be a matter of spirituality and faith formation because this monetary system affects our sense of call to do as much good in the world as we can.

Kulyk suggests also that our relationship with money must be invited into our spiritual lives because the "more we understand the power and influence of the whale, the more we can alter its power in our lives, to some extent. In altering its power, we can live within it, in a more balanced, healthy way — mentally, physically and emotionally." We are not powerless.

No matter how much money we have or do not have, or whether we grew up in a mansion, a one-room apartment or somewhere in between, most of us have a complex and emotional relationship with money. What we have and what we believe about what we have or need, influences the decisions we make about how we live outlives and who we think we are — in other words, how we live inside the whale.

Kulyk writes, “Dismissing or denying or not talking about the system’s power feeds that power, but spiritual transformation feeds a higher good beyond the system’s focus on individualism.” As Jesus and Kulyk suggest, while we may not be able to live outside the beast, we can live inside it spiritually. We can bring our fears and concerns about money into the light of Wisdom compassionately and with no judgment and make spiritually informed decisions. “If our hearts change concerning our relationship with money, the heart of the whale changes as well.”

Each week throughout the series there will be a take home page in the worship guide that invites you to examine your relationship with money. It may be helpful to take an honest look back at your family structure that you grew up in and what it taught you about money. This week you are invited to spend time reflecting on your earliest memories related to money and offer some questions to guide your reflection time.

So, my friends, this Wonder-Full Life series is a spiritual journey to enable our hearts to change so we can transform the art of the whale. By courageously facing our relationship with money, we can be more at ease in a world dominated by money and help us to stop letting it be a dis-ease in our lives and our church. Simply addressing this together as a community is one proof already that we are in good company, and the light of God’s love shines around us as we reside in the belly of the whale together. We are not alone; God is with us. Thanks be to God. Amen.