

SERMON TITLE: "Stressed Out about Finances? God Can Help!"
SERMON TEXT: Luke 12:22-34
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James
OCCASION: October 2, 2016, at First UMC

INTRODUCTION

A number of years ago, a woman drove in a limousine to a Burlington Coat Factory store in Ohio and declared she had won the lottery. She announced that she would pay up to \$500 for every customer in the store to make their "free" purchase, but she left a riot in her wake. She got everyone's hopes up, and then disappeared without paying the bill. The customers were so upset that they threw coats all over the floor and some took merchandise without paying—feeling somehow that her announcement entitled them to get their coats for free. The store management had to call in police to calm the situation and keep from losing all their inventory.

Wow! That's financial stress that no one saw coming! I'm sure Burlington management and employees didn't go to work that morning expecting that kind of scenario to break loose in their store.

We may not have experienced a wild event quite like that, but many of us have experienced the financial stress that comes at us suddenly with the loss of a job, a health crisis that disables us from working, or an investment that rapidly loses its value. Sometimes those financial problems are short-term, and, with some good decisions and good fortune, they eventually pass. But, for many people, financial stress is a long-term reality that never seems to go away.

Over the past weeks, we've talked about activity stress, relationship stress, and health stress. Today, I want us to think about Luke 12, and consider how God can help us with financial stress.

1—BY PROVIDING WHAT WE NEED

The first and most basic assurance we see in this teaching of Jesus is that, when we're experiencing financial stress, God can help by providing what we need. There's no need to worry about what you'll eat or wear, said Jesus, because God feeds the ravens and clothes the lilies. Jesus insisted

that we are even more loved and valued by God than birds and flowers, so, of course, God will make sure our needs are met. God who created us is well aware of what it takes for us to live in this world, and God wants us to thrive. So, we should stop worrying so much, said Jesus, and we should have more faith!

Believing that God will provide what we need may come easier if we have reasonable expectations. If we think that God is supposed to provide us with luxury vehicles, mansions, gourmet meals, fancy vacations, expensive hobbies, glamorous wardrobes, and plastic surgery, then most of us will be disappointed. But if we adjust our thinking to the realities of our economic situation, then we can begin to appreciate what God does provide: adequate housing, sufficient clothing, enough food, inexpensive recreational opportunities, and the amazing beauty of nature.

I know there are people who are suffering from unemployment and under-employment. There are people who have disabling conditions that impede their ability to earn a paycheck. And there are kids who grow up in chronic, intergenerational poverty that's really hard to overcome. We must never make light of the trouble those people have making ends meet. I'm sure that fathers and mothers and children in those situations have some legitimate doubts that God values and loves them and that God will provide what they need. Who wouldn't wonder if the divine deck were stacked against them in such difficult situations? But rather than giving in to that despair, we followers of Jesus are called upon to uphold our belief that God does love and value every human being, and that God does want to provide what is needed by the children of this world.

In fact, that's why many of us helped during our recent Hometown Mission Week. We served suppers at the Lantern House and the Ogden Rescue Mission, we bagged produce at the Joyce Hansen Hall Food Bank, and—over at Community UMC—we prepared 20,000 meal kits to send to third world countries. Why do we Christians do these things? We serve generously because we believe that God is generous with us. We have faith that, if we share what we have, there'll be enough for everyone. We

have faith that poverty doesn't have to be a defining trait of human life. We trust that the God who wants to lift some of the economic burden off our shoulders sometimes works through us to help relieve the worries of other people too. The promise is for them and for us. When we're stressed out about finances, God can help by providing what we need.

2—BY PUTTING US TO WORK

I suppose someone could read this passage of scripture in Luke 12 and think that Jesus was giving us permission to be lazy. "Don't worry; be happy" could be the mantra of a person who never gets out of bed or off the couch. "God will provide" could be the excuse of someone who would rather play today than plan and work for a strong tomorrow. When we hear Jesus say, "Do not keep striving for what you are to eat and what you are to drink" and that "the lilies neither toil nor spin," we could interpret that as permission for us to sit back and expect someone else to fend for us.

But I don't think that was Jesus' intent. In fact, if we look at the context of today's scripture, we see quite the opposite. In the story right before today's reading, Jesus told about a rich man who raised abundant crops and thought about building a larger barn in which to store all his grain. In the story right after today's reading, Jesus advised his listeners that they should be dressed for action with their lamps lit, alert and ready. And, in the workplace parable that begins in verse 42, Jesus indicated that negative consequences will occur to those managers and slaves who know what their master wants them to do, but then fail to prepare and act accordingly. Jesus ended that parable with the saying, "From everyone to whom much has been given, much will be required; and from the one to whom much has been entrusted, even more will be demanded."

From these contextual clues, we get the clear idea that Jesus assumed people would work—whether raising crops, building barns, providing light during the night shift, being at-the-ready to serve, or applying all one's skills to what the boss wants done. From this context in Luke 12, we can easily see that, one of the ways God can help us is by giving us opportunities to work and earn a living. God has

given us resources and abilities by which we can be productive, responsible, and trustworthy. God has given us brains, brawn, and talents to work and earn a living. One of the most significant ways God helps us avoid and decrease financial stress is by putting us to work.

3—BY SHIFTING OUR PRIORITIES

Yes, God provides what we need, including some opportunities to help ourselves through our own labor. But, if we get too focused on fulfilling our own needs and never being satisfied with how much we have, we can end up working ourselves to exhaustion, and for what? Just to be constantly worried that we don't have more and more and more? If all we're doing is frantically working for our own gain, our ambition doesn't do us much good. It has no lasting value.

What's worth striving for, said Jesus, is God's kingdom. And what is God's kingdom? God's kingdom is life in which those who are able participate actively in helping God provide for those who have less. Putting our attention on helping God care for others is a different kind of priority than just enriching ourselves. It's the kind of priority that can cause us to stop worrying about our own accumulations or the lack of them. When we have important things to think about and do, we have less anxiety about our own issues. So, what I'm trying to say is that, when we're feeling financial stress, God can help by shifting our priorities.

Thursday through Saturday, I was at a conference in Denver sponsored by our United Methodist General Board of Pensions and Health Benefits. I'm proud to tell you that we United Methodists have some wonderful people working on our behalf. Our benefits officers and boards promote spiritual health all across our country by easing the financial stress of clergy so we can focus on our congregations and communities.

As I was at the conference, I was reminded of a way God shifted our United Methodist priorities several years ago. Since its inception, the General Board of Pensions and Health Benefits had only been focused on the benefits of American clergy. But the time came when our U.S. board decided to reach

out and help the clergy in places like Africa, where they had no pension plans set up at all. That big campaign began with an opportunity for all of us American clergy to make personal donations. And our conference boards of pension were also asked to share some of our collective reserve funds. As our hearts were stretched to consider the plight of our much-poorer clergy brothers and sisters in faraway places, our anxiety about our own financial situation decreased. For a time, God shifted our worries and our priorities away from the accumulations in our own accounts and to the benefits we could and did provide for others.

The good news is that you don't have to be clergy to get in on this benefit. No matter who we are, the principle is the same. When we're stressed out by finances, God can help by shifting our priorities to assisting the others of this world. A great example of this could be our World Communion Sunday Offering opportunity today. This offering provides scholarships for ethnic students who, generally speaking, have a much harder time affording a college education. Maybe, if we allow God to shift our priorities to those students, we'll get our minds off our own worries for a while. This kingdom-of-God opportunity has the possibility of reducing both their financial stress and ours.

CONCLUSION

If there is any lingering doubt among us that God can help with our financial stress, I want to point out a couple other opportunities that God is providing. In your bulletin insert, you can see the details about the free "Family Finance Camps" offered on October 6, 13, and 20. There's also a \$20 program called "Money with Your Honey" offered on October 7 and 28. Both those sets of classes include dinner and will teach the basics about money and budgeting. For those who need a job or other resources, I'm sure the leaders of those classes have some great connections. If you don't personally need this kind of information, maybe you could help God provide it to someone who does. No matter why we have financial stress, the important thing to remember is that, yes, God can help!