

NCC Seminarian Ann Aaberg presented this sermon on Sunday, 30 January 2005 in Marshfield Hills, Massachusetts. It is based on Genesis 1:26–31.

Econ 101

I HAVE BEEN TO THE MOUNTAIN TOP!

I have seen the light! And I have found the answer to why we are here!

Well, not exactly. I've been to a hill in Newton where my seminary is situated. And I haven't really seen THE light, but several things were illuminated for me last week. And, well, I don't have the complete answer as to why we are here, but I have stumbled across a few insights about how we might live our lives. And I need to tell you that I'm so excited about what I've learned and what it means for me that I am compelled to share it with you this morning.

This month over my semester break I took a course to satisfy my seminary's Church Administration requirement. The name of the course was: "Money Matters – Responsible and Responsive Christian Stewardship". So are you thinking what I was thinking? I'm going to learn about church budgets and annual giving and capital campaigns – been there, done that. Those things were included eventually – even negotiating pastors' salaries (that should come in handy some day) but this course was so much more. It was so much more that it actually changed the way I look at my life and with the help of God will change the way I live from here on.

For those of you who don't know this about me, I'm a numbers person. I majored in accounting in college, earned my CPA (Certificate in Public Accounting) with a large prestigious accounting firm and was a sole practitioner for about 10 years. Here at North Community Church I served on an ad hoc committee years ago to institute internal financial controls over the way we handle our money and I've also served as your Treasurer. At home I'm responsible for our money matters and I'm the Chief Financial Officer of our family business.

Up until a few weeks ago, my money life and my faith life were two very separate things. I believed that my money was my own business and I certainly didn't want to taint my spiritual journey with messy and impure earthly money matters – so I kept them separate. My faith life was over here – or up here – and money was over here. So much so in fact, that at one point when I was anguishing over our drop in income when I quit my job and entered seminary, my husband Doug said to

me, "I thought you said God would provide," to which I answered, "But God hasn't seen the spreadsheet!"

I have to admit that I never understood how money and faith intersected.

I would look at our church budget and think, "Well, we need to run this like a business." We have a building and heat and electricity and salaries and benefits and we need to all contribute to keep the place running. When Ginger would tell us that our giving was a matter of faith and to ask God's guidance in determining our pledges, I didn't get it. I knew what our family income was, our mortgage payment, the bills, and I knew I'd go home and take a look and see what we could afford, but I really did not get the faith part. Did faith mean pledging something beyond our means and then believe really hard that we could afford it? No, when it came to money, my calculator spit out the answers – not much room for faith there.

So you have an idea of what I brought with me into this course on ministry and money. We were assigned several books to read in advance and that was where I began to discover these new glimmers and this is what I want to share with you today.

First let me say that I don't mean to imply that this is simple. In preparing for this morning, I could have gone in 40 different directions. Thousands of volumes have been written on faith and money. (And over the past couple of weeks, I've read several of them.) In fact, I brought with me today a bibliography that I'll make available in the narthex and at coffee hour. You may be as astounded as I was. One frequent theme is our secrecy about money, especially in churches. We don't talk about it! It's either too private or distasteful or both! But we need to talk about it – it is part of nearly every facet of our lives.

I would love to facilitate conversations about money here. I invite all of us to make time to do that – it's not only fascinating, but believe it or not, will provide an additional way for our spiritual growth. I had to keep a daily journal for a week about money in my life as a requirement for this course. And I offer that possibility to you as well for raising your own awareness. I don't mean the kind of money journal where you write down everything you spend, but one where you go over your day and note the times money came in and what you were thinking and feeling and then reflect upon it spiritually. Where was God for you during those times?

Well, with all that's written about it, we start and end with the Bible as our guide, but even there we find conflicting messages about money. Someone has actually counted how many times possessions and giving are topics in the Bible – let me give you some context here:

The topic of believing or believers appears 272 times; the topic of praying or prayer appears 371 times; the topic of love or loving appears 714 times; possessions and giving? 2,172 times! This same counter estimates that out of the 38 parables, 17 of them are about possessions.

Many of the authors that we read took us right back to creation, to our scripture reading from Genesis this morning. With two themes in mind: the abundance of God's creation – enough for all of us and all the creatures who live here with us – and our role as humans going forward. Caretakers. Stewards.

God entrusted us with the world. Here it is, humans. I have given you everything. Plenty for all of you. Take care of it. Have dominion over it. Listen to that word dominion – do you hear the Latin word "dominus"? Dominus means God. Dominion means having godlike control. God gave us the world and said take care of it the way I would. Take care of the world the way I would.

And later God sent Jesus to be sure we'd get it right and Jesus's message is consistent: Love one another. Don't get hung up on hoarding wealth, don't obsess about our lives, God knows what we need and is taking care of us, even when we don't feel it, love each other as God loves us. We have enough and we know what to do with it.

Okay – but here comes that separation again. Look at where we are today. We have to live in this economy and its issues are beyond the American economy, now we're looking at a global economy. Today our understanding of the term economics is the distribution of scarce resources. You may remember that definition from your Econ class or from high school. Distribution of scarce resources. Not enough, so we are all competing for what's there. And when we're not consuming and using it up, we're hanging on to it and storing it up for later.

But now listen to this. Our word for economy comes from the Greek word "oikos" which means household. We are all members of God's household and if we think in broader terms of ourselves as living in God's economy, then we are surrounded by abundance, not scarcity. And as stewards of that abundance it is up to us, it is our job, to make sure that the rest of creation has enough! As responsible caretakers of God's abundant creation and with Jesus reminding us that we are commanded to love one another, while we are here living in God's household, we are to take care of this earth and all who live upon it.

So as we decide how we will earn our money and the intricacies of how we will dispose of it, we need to be in touch with God all the time, we need to show God the spreadsheet, we need to use our faith to make decisions about how we will use money. And yes, our decisions about money are between God and ourselves. But they are also between ourselves and our community. Because it is in community with each

other that we are able to share and work toward our common vision of a healed creation. We can't do that alone.

This church is our community. It is here in this church that we not only mark our lives. It is here that we make our lives. We hold each other's babies as they are brought here to be baptized. We are teaching each other's children about God. We celebrate the birth of Christ together. We celebrate his Resurrection here. We clung to each other right here in these pews when our American world blew up on 9/11. Some gathered here at night two years ago and desperately prayed together that we would not go to war. We have cried in each other's arms over the loss of loved ones. We have prayed for each other's health. In time, we will bury each other. Our lives are lived right here.

When we realize that it is right here that we take care of each other as God instructed in Genesis and as Jesus commanded in the New Testament, then we have no choice but to take care of this place, too. God gave us this holy place and gave us each other to love. It is our job to take care of it and each other. Maybe that is why we're here.