

For Love or Money

Acts 8:9-24

May 24, 2020

First Presbyterian, Luling

There's lots of things that I wouldn't do, as the saying goes, not for love nor money. I would not go bungie jumping, not for love nor money. I would not go on a cruise, even before the coronavirus, for love nor money. At this point in my life, I don't think I would dye my hair, for love nor money. There's also some things I would do for love but not for money. If I was at your house for lunch and you served me Jello, I would eat it even though I hate it, because I love you. But I would not eat Jello for money. I will play Uno every day because I love Rachel, even though I'm sick of it. But otherwise, no one could pay me to play another game of Uno for a very long time. And I'm sure there are some things I would do for money but not for love. I would work at another nine to five office job for money, but not because I love it, because I most certainly do not. I would do it for money if my family needed me to. So maybe that's for love after all.

Love and money are both powerful influences and motivators. And it's easy to get mixed up as to which one is appropriate for which situation. I think it is particularly tempting to try to use money in place of love, rather than the reverse. Especially for people who have plenty of money—they think they can buy whatever they need or want. I think it's less common for people to try to use love in place of money, but that may be a lack of imagination on my part. I can't even think of an example, but maybe you can.

This story about Simon the magician in Acts is a story about love and money, among other things. I will confess to you that I'm sure I've read this story before, but it didn't stick in my memory. It never appears in the lectionary, except for a few verses in the middle of it that are about John and Peter and not Simon the magician. However, it popped up in the Bible study we're doing on Wednesdays, and we agreed that it was an intriguing story. I'm going to assume that it isn't a very familiar story to you either. It certainly is not a frequent reference in Sunday school lessons.

Simon the magician is going around in Samaria performing deeds of power, which gets translated as magic. Jewish sources in general treat magic with great caution and suspicion, because magicians frequently used the powers of the universe in service to themselves and their pocketbooks. For whatever reason, Simon has some access to special powers, and he has used them. Philip arrives on

the scene. He's not one of the original disciples, but he is bringing the good news of Jesus Christ to the Samaritans, which was a major step for the new believers. Philip *also* performs deeds of power, which gets translated as miracles, even though it's the same word. Magic and miracles. What Philip is doing probably looks from the outside exactly like what Simon the magician has been doing. But Philip is doing it in the name of Jesus.

This could have been a problem, could have provoked a rivalry, but it doesn't. Simon is impressed with Philip and is baptized. Word gets back to Jerusalem, to the original disciples, that Philip is baptizing people in Samaria, but these new converts have not received the gift of the Holy Spirit, that everyone else received at Pentecost. So John and Peter come to check out the situation. John and Peter pray for the new converts, and lay their hands upon them, and they receive the Holy Spirit. Simon witnesses this, and wants not just the gift of the Spirit, but the power to give the Spirit himself, just like he sees John and Peter do.

Though he had been baptized by Philip, though he had been impressed by deeds of power done in Jesus's name, Acts makes it clear that Simon's conversion was incomplete. He continued to put his trust in the power of money rather than in the power of Jesus. And so he asks if he can *buy* the gift of the Holy Spirit's power from Peter and John. It sounds ridiculous to us, to think that a price could be assigned to the Holy Spirit, but it seems perfectly reasonable to someone who has performed deeds of power and made money from doing it. The Holy Spirit is just another kind of power, and money ought to be able to buy it, too.

Peter and John can grant the Holy Spirit as a gift of love, but not in exchange for money. The Holy Spirit comes from a different kind of economy entirely, and that is what Simon doesn't grasp. Peter rather forcefully and graphically, condemns Simon and calls for his repentance. But the story closes with Simon asking John and Peter to pray for him, that he would be able to repent. He never appears again, so we have no idea what ultimately happened to him.

In the divine economy, harsh human words don't have the final say-so, because prayer is more powerful and works on a different time frame and schedule. Peter doesn't seem inclined to forgive Simon the magician—not for love nor money. But God...God definitely wouldn't forgive for money, but will do so for love, for all eternity.

In the divine economy, money doesn't work. It isn't a commodity. It doesn't hold power. The divine economy runs on love, and grace, and gift. The divine

economy doesn't put a price on a single human life, or the gift of the Spirit, or forgiveness. They are priceless. Of infinite worth. Every single one. There's no possible medium of exchange, nothing to bargain with. These things are a gift of grace from the Holy One. In the divine economy, humans don't always get what they want when they want it, because the divine economy pays with love, and love is patient, Paul reminds us in Corinthians. Humans will always have a tendency and temptation to fall back on the things that we value and give us power, like money. But when we make decisions and weigh consequences on the basis of love, when we can convince ourselves to do that—then we are participating in God's economy. The divine economy doesn't run on money, but it does run on love, thanks be to God.