

This past Monday, I went to the State House in Boston with probably about 200 other clergy.

We were there in support of a movement that was born in North Carolina and has spread throughout the country, it's called Moral Mondays.

It's a movement led by clergy, specifically a man named Rev. Dr. William Barber, whom you may have heard of.

He's a very prominent and public theologian.

So the reason why we gathered at the State House on Monday was to present a Higher Moral Ground declaration to Governor Charlie Baker, saying this is what we, as people of faith, want him to focus on.

This same thing happened at 24 other states around the country as faithful people gathered to present this same declaration to their governors.

This is a non-partisan movement that tries to speak truth to power, so what exactly did this moral declaration cover?

In short: everything.

So that I don't omit anything, I will read the words directly from the Moral Revival website ([www.moralrevival.org](http://www.moralrevival.org)).

*"This Higher Ground Moral Declaration provides a moral agenda for our nation on issues including:*

*democracy and voting rights; poverty and economic justice; workers' rights; education; healthcare; environmental justice; immigrant rights and challenging xenophobia; criminal justice; LGBTQ rights; and war-mongering and the military. For each issue area, an individual moral and constitutional foundation is established.*

*The positions are neither left nor right, nor conservative or liberal.*

*Rather, they are morally defensible, constitutionally consistent, and economically sound.*

*Most importantly, they represent, as Dr. King urged, a revolution in values.”*

One of the goals of the movement is to present this Higher Ground Moral Declaration to every candidate for president, member of Congress and state Governor.

There is a scriptural reference for each topic that I mentioned, as this is a faith-based movement.

But the declaration is also rooted in the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution and the Preamble to the Constitution, because members of the movement believe it is rooted in the principles that our nation was founded on.

It's a call to break the silence on the fact that poverty, inequality, and systemic racism are still rampant.

And voting rights and democracy are being trampled in many ways, including the repeal of critical elements of the Voting Rights Act and the practice of gerrymandering across the country.

Millions of people still lack healthcare, living wage jobs, quality education they need, and racism, hatred and bigotry are disintegrating any possibility for life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness for many people in these United States.

While that list might sound overwhelming and it might make you despondent, the truth is that this Higher Ground Declaration is rooted in hope.

It's rooted in the belief that we can do better, that we owe it to ourselves and our fellow citizens to create a just and equitable country where people have the resources they need to create a meaningful and fulfilling life for themselves and their families.

And the fact of the matter is that our nation has the resources.

We are the richest country on earth and we can do better and this movement by people of faith is calling upon our elected leaders to take a stand on these moral issues.

Now, when I was reflecting upon all the topics that the declaration encompasses, I was surprised by how many issues I believe are motivated by economic incentives.

I'll discuss a few topics and how each of them is motivated by the desire to make money.

Why do we have to fight for worker's rights and a higher minimum wage?

Because employers have a financial incentive to deny workers more rights and a higher wage to protect their bottom line.

Why is education becoming increasingly more expensive and unaffordable?

Well, there are a lot of reasons, in part because states aren't funding their state schools like they used to and schools are spending more money on administration than ever before, and someone has to pay for it.

Why do we have to fight for environmental justice?

Because the use of fossil fuels and the rolling back of regulations which protect the environment, and the abuse of natural resources in our country and developing countries, and irresponsible, unregulated development are all economically motivated.

Governments and corporations are looking at their profit margins and what will help their economy in this moment without regard for environmental impact.

And why do we have to fight for immigrant rights?

Because people are afraid that immigrants will take their jobs and therefore their livelihood that they worked hard to achieve and that they believe they deserve.

And why do we have to fight for a more just criminal justice system?

Because our country has 5% of the world's population and yet we have 25% of the world's prisoners.

We have a higher incarceration rate than any other country in the world.

Why is this?

Part of it is because of the privatization of the prison industry, which began in the 1980's.

We now have a for-profit criminal justice system in which corporations make money off of having prisoners in their prisons.

I could go on, but my point is that so many of these issues are motivated by economics and the desire of a few to make money off of many.

Today's seemingly strange story that Jesus told was about a rich man and his so-called corrupt manager.

When the rich man found out that the manager was squandering his property, he summoned him and fired him.

But the shrewd manager did something before leaving his job.

He summoned all his master's debtors, and one by one, he asked them how much they owed his master, and he lowered their debt, and then let them go on their way.

The debt of 100 jugs of olive oil became 50 and a hundred containers of wheat became eighty.

Now, the parallel is often drawn that the rich man is somehow a God-figure in this story, but I don't want to go down that road.

I don't think we need to deify any of the characters, they are simply people in a story and our job is to figure out what lesson Jesus is trying to teach us through the parable.

Well, the truth is that us progressive religious folk, we don't like talking about money.

I can't speak for everyone, but I think for the most part, it makes us squirm.

New Englanders are notorious for being discreet with their wealth and you can't talk about money in church too much otherwise you'll drive folks away.

Well, guess what?

If we are going to be Christians who are faithful to our holy scriptures, we have to talk about money.

Here's why: Sixteen of the thirty-eight parables were concerned with how to handle money and possessions.

In the Gospels, one out of ten verses (288 in all) deal directly with the subject of money. The Bible offers 500 verses on prayer, less than 500 verses on faith, but more than 2,000 verses on money and possessions.

Our refusal to discuss money and faith means that lots of churches have an unhealthy perspective when it comes to money.

Either churches have a whole lot of it and don't do anything with it, or they have a lot of it and they're burning through it, or they don't have any and they deny it until they have to close their doors.

Phew.

Those are all unsustainable options.

So what is Jesus trying to tell us?

Maybe we need to be more wise or shrewd with our money, take a lesson from business people!

They know how to make money and keep it and use it in their best interests (for the most part).

What if we used our money wisely, didn't squander it or eschew it, but used it to promote and create positive relationships?

Money is a tool, just like any other tool, it can be used for good or evil.

What if we set up no-interest loans for people trying to get on their feet or start a new business?

What if we used it to patronize ethical companies that treat their workers fairly and pay them a living wage?

What if we used our money to create relationships and equity among all people, rather than using it for divisive means?

It is so often used to create inequality, the creditor and the debtor, the employee and employer, the powerful and the powerless.

The manager could be seen in a lot of different ways, and one of them is that he transformed a bad situation into one that benefitted him and others.

By reducing other people's debts, he created a new set of relationships based not on the vertical relationship between lenders and debtors (rooted in monetary exchange) but on something more like the reciprocal and egalitarian relationships of friends.

And, it's possible that in lowering their debts he was making a personal sacrifice.

You might wonder how the heck that's possible, and in order to understand, we have to briefly discuss the economics of Roman-occupied Galilee in the first century.

Now, in the Bible, receiving interest on loans was forbidden because it exploited the poor.

However, in Jesus' day, as with today too, it happened all the time.

Wealthy landlords created ways to extort illiterate peasants by charging interest under other guises, even though this was a direct violation of biblical law.

So it's possible that what the manager did is reduce the people's debts to what they originally owed, without the hidden interest charges.

And in fact, the manager might have been giving up his own personal profits because he usually got his own cut, on top of the 50% layer for the landlord and the obligatory payment for Rome.

When he lowered the payments, he might have forgiven his own cut of the interest.

And maybe, if the rich landlord was a Jew (we don't know because the text doesn't say), he would have known the reaching against interest.

And maybe, after recognizing that he needed to observe covenantal laws, he commended his steward for doing that.

It's not entirely likely and it's giving both of them a huge benefit of the doubt, but it's possible.

At the end of this passage, we hear an incredibly well-known verse in which Jesus says, "You cannot serve God and wealth" (Luke 16:13).

This means that we have to make God our priority, make sure that the ways we use our resources, especially our wealth, are aligned with God's call for us in the world.

So I am not here to tell you to sell all your possessions or take a vow of poverty, but neither should you hoard your riches.

We can be wise and shrewd, using our money to create more just and equitable world for all people.

We can use our money to create egalitarian relationships, not ones rooted in power and debt.

After all, the Lord's prayer says, "forgive us our debts."

Maybe we should stop worrying about our slice of the pie and start forgiving the debts of others.

Maybe we should use our money in such a way that together we create a country and economic system in which all people can have life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

Amen.

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