

DONALD V. ROMANIK

# Money Legacies

 CHURCH  
PUBLISHING  
INCORPORATED

little books  
on faith &  
money

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# *Contents*

<i>Introduction</i>	vii
1 ■ <i>Telling My Money Story</i>	1
2 ■ <i>Churches Have Money Stories Too</i>	13
3 ■ <i>Telling Your Money Stories</i>	25
4 ■ <i>Why Money Stories Matter</i>	35
5 ■ <i>Putting It All Together and Next Steps</i>	51
<i>Conclusion</i>	59
<i>Tools and Resources</i>	63

## *Introduction*

We all love stories. Storytelling is imbedded in our DNA as human beings. From earliest times, long before the written word, the history, customs, traditions, and practices of individual tribes and local communities were passed down from generation to generation, not as a recitation of facts but as stories. Stories were also used to explain the unexplainable—those mysteries such as birth, death, nature, and the existence of a higher power or force, eventually described as God. Furthermore, the stories were repeated time and time again, remembered and even internalized, so that those who listened became those who told. This process continued through the early millennia of the human experience. After a while, the stories were represented in pictures, symbols, characters, and eventually in letters and words, moving from oral tradition to written history. But the stories continued, sometimes altered or modified along the way, but still maintaining their incredible relevance and utter importance even to this day.

People of faith, or those who follow or practice a particular religious tradition, are especially fond of stories. Jewish and Christian heritage and custom have been passed down to us through stories—about creation, sin, floods, slavery, freedom, laws, prophets, angels, and, ultimately, redemption and

resurrection. The Gospels, including those that never made it into the Bible, are stories about the life and teachings of Jesus as told by his disciples to other followers and eventually written down.

While we love to tell stories, we also love to talk about ourselves, especially those qualities and experiences of which we are most proud. Even the most introverted person will lighten up and be willing to respond when asked about their job, their family, or their accomplishments. Parents love to talk about their children, and grandparents are never hesitant to brag about their grandchildren and even show pictures to total strangers. Telling our story is an essential element of the human experience and is the precursor to making connections, establishing relationships, and falling in love.

Our storytelling tradition extends into our faith communities and is an important part of our worship and fellowship activities. The Liturgy of the Word, the first part of our communal worship as Episcopalians, includes listening to the stories of the people of Israel, the life and teachings of Jesus, and the experiences of his early followers. Our favorite preachers are often those who make the Gospels come alive by sharing their own personal journeys and experiences. Churches with active newcomer ministries provide opportunities for visitors or seekers to tell their stories. This type of engagement is not only an effective evangelism tool but also a way for church leaders to learn more about the prospective member and how they might be incorporated into the life of the community. We find out

## *Introduction*

about people's backgrounds, families, careers, health conditions, hobbies, and even culinary abilities and food preferences. There seem to be very few limits on the information we seek and share in our parish family settings. Or are there?

If a congregation is truly serious about welcoming a newcomer into the body of Christ rather than a liturgical social club, these conversations must morph beyond general information and begin to delve into a person's desire and longing for a relationship with God. As the relationship deepens, the general questions should become more specific and begin to focus on the individual's spiritual side, especially as they begin to participate in more formal Christian formation opportunities. Questions like:

“What was your religious tradition growing up?”

“What are you looking for in a church home?”

“How and why did you decide to become part of our community?”

Or posing the most direct and poignant prompt: “Tell us about your spiritual journey.”

This often begins the important process of transforming a seeker into a newcomer, a newcomer into a member, and a member into a disciple. This is what a church should be all about. Through telling and listening to our stories, we deepen our connections to God, each other, and the wider community.

This is not easy stuff. Asking a stranger about their relationship with God, or sharing your own spiritual experiences, creates

a seismic shift in the process of establishing or building a relationship in a church setting. It can be intimidating, embarrassing, and intimate at its core. But most of us acknowledge that at some point in our church communities, the conversations need to shift to core matters of faith and a relationship with God.

As difficult as these faith-related conversations may be, there is a related topic that may feel more challenging, intimidating, embarrassing, and even intimate. In the process of incorporating people into our church communities, what if we asked questions like these:

“What was your family’s financial situation growing up?”

“How did your family express its values through its spending practices?”

“When did you first learn and appreciate the value of money?”

“Do you consider yourself a spender or a saver?”

Or, “Tell us your money story; tell us about your financial journey.”

The response may be: “What? Stop! It’s bad enough that you are asking me about my faith. My money story and my financial journey are none of the church’s business.”

It’s true. Talking about money is still the big taboo, especially in church circles—and especially among Episcopalians. We talk about everything else in church—the most intimate details of our lives, including health and even our relationships. What is it about money that makes it so off-limits in faith-based

## *Introduction*

conversations? Is it none of the church's business to ask their members to tell their money stories along with other essential aspects of their lives? If we ask questions about faith, why can't we ask about money? What would Jesus say?

It's pretty amazing how much Jesus talks about money. In the New Testament, Jesus offers more wisdom and has more to say about money than any other subject other than the "kingdom of God." Eleven of his forty or so parables were about money or use money to illustrate his message. We all know the story about the hidden treasure and the pearl, the parable of the talents where the master entrusts his servants with money, and the parable of the rich man and Lazarus in which roles are reversed in the afterlife. While these are familiar stories, I think we often fail to recognize that they deal directly and specifically with money.

In addition to his parables, some of Jesus's most profound encounters involved people's complicated relationships with money and riches. In Luke 19, we meet Zacchaeus, an unscrupulous tax collector who confesses his wrongdoings and makes amends by agreeing to give half his possessions to the poor and pay back those he cheated with four times the amount. Jesus's immediate response to this bold move by Zacchaeus are the words: "Today salvation has come to this house . . ." (Luke 19:9a).

On the other hand, we have Jesus's interaction with a young man who asks him what he must do to inherit eternal life. After the young man assures Jesus that he keeps all the commandments



of the law, Jesus says the following: “You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me” (Mark 10:21). Mark tells us that man walks away in sadness because he had great wealth.

While we may decide to sidestep the message of the parables, it is much more difficult to ignore these bold and clear interpersonal encounters. These challenging words from Jesus continue to shake us up to this very day, especially for those of us who have accumulated some financial resources. Is Jesus actually saying that our individual salvation is dependent on giving all our worldly possessions to the poor? Immediately after the rich young man leaves the scene, Jesus is even more direct: *“Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God”* (Matthew 19:24).

However we may interpret these challenging passages, Jesus is clearly instructing us that, as Christians, we need to confront our relationship with money. These two stories imply that Zacchaeus directly acknowledged his unhealthy and corrupt attitude toward money and decided to help others, while the rich young man allowed money to interfere with his relationship with God. Throughout the Gospels, Jesus uses money as a tool and metaphor for illustrating the limitations of human priorities and the need to shift to a healthier and more life-giving attitudes toward wealth. He drives home this point in the Sermon on the Mount when he tells us:

## *Introduction*

Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. (Matthew 6:19–21)

In preaching about the kingdom of God using the beloved Beatitudes as an illustration, Jesus was aware of the significant challenges we face in trying to follow his way. And, in this passage and others, Jesus was willing to name those impediments to embracing his message. This bold statement clearly suggests that while many things may interfere with or distract us from a true relationship with God, money is at the top of the list. And that is why money should be an important discussion topic in the church.

While many of us may have issues with Jesus's exhortation to the rich young man to sell all his belongings and give the proceeds to the poor, most of us would agree that money, and how we spend it, is the clear indication of our values and priorities. Our monthly credit/debit card statement reveals more about ourselves than any other record or document. Furthermore, money defines who we are to the outside world, and permeates our work, our friendships, our social standing, and our access to necessities like food, housing, and health care. In our society, money equates success, influence, and power. Even our closest friends judge us based on how much money we have

and, more importantly, how we spend it. For example, “She doesn’t have a lot of money, but she is an incredibly generous person,” or “What does he do with all his money? He clearly doesn’t spend it on himself.”

Whether we like it or not, money also affects our self-worth—the way we look, act, and function in society. We feel better about ourselves when we have money in our pocket or in the bank and less self-confident if we are experiencing a level of financial hardship. Unfortunately, these societal and personal attitudes around money lead to unhealthy and sometimes tragic results: massive credit card debt, real estate foreclosures, bankruptcy, and even suicide.

Whether we have a little or a lot of money, our spending patterns not only define us as consumers, but also as followers of Jesus. Money is not only about our values and priorities; money lies at the heart of Christianity and the fundamental premise that God created everything and everything ultimately belongs to God. This precept is totally contrary to our consumer society, our sense of entitlement, and the economic theory that everything we earn belongs to us.

Fundamental to a Christian view of money is how we should give it away. As followers of Jesus, our only response to an all-generous God is to be generous in return. And while we can exercise our response in ways other than with money, financial generosity is key, especially in our economic system and consumer-driven society. That is what stewardship is about—caring for and managing all of God’s resources, especially those for

## *Introduction*

which we have a particular responsibility—our own money. Therefore, stewardship is not only one aspect of Christian life, it is the summation and culmination of how we live as followers of Jesus. Jesus talks so much about money because it is a tangible way we participate in building up God's kingdom here on earth in our own time and place.

Before we can embrace and practice Christian stewardship to our fullest, each of us needs to discern and acknowledge those obstacles that prevent us from doing so. These obstacles are not necessarily evil or even negative; rather, they represent our day-to-day attitudes and experiences around money that have developed over our lifetime. Talk leads to action. Therefore, we need to talk about money with our partners, our families, and the wider community as part of the work of change and transformation.

Stewardship lies at the heart of who we are and what we do as Christians. Since the way we handle money is an important component of stewarding God's creation, the church must talk about money, and, more importantly, encourage and empower its members to do the same. Rather than it being none of the church's business, the personal money stories of its members provide insights into hopes, dreams, spiritual longings, need for community, and, most important, their relationships with God.

This is not easy stuff. Since secular culture proclaims that money defines us, it not surprising that many of us feel ashamed of our relationship with money at times and find it difficult to

discuss. Church leaders should be willing to address the financial aspects of spiritual well-being. It is not so much about what is in our bank accounts but about helping us examine our relationships with money. Our individual relationship with money also affects the wider community. When we explore the issue of money for ourselves, we can more effectively address the financial well-being of our congregations. People with unhealthy attitudes about money in their personal lives cannot effectively manage or address the financial affairs of their faith community.

Jerry Colonna is an executive coach who uses the skills he learned as a venture capitalist to help other entrepreneurs. He draws on his variety of experiences to help clients design a more conscious life and make changes to their career to improve performance and satisfaction. Previously, Colonna was a partner with JPMorgan Partners (JPMP), the private equity arm of JPMorgan Chase. He joined JPMP from Flatiron Partners, which he launched in 1996 with his partner, Fred Wilson. Flatiron became one of the most successful early-stage investment programs in New York City.

Colonna's book *Reboot: Leadership and the Art of Growing Up*, published in 2019, is a journey of radical self-inquiry, helping CEOs reset their lives by sorting through the emotional baggage holding them back professionally and, even more importantly, in their relationships. In *Reboot*, Colonna inspires leaders to hold themselves responsible for their choices and for the possibility of achieving their dreams.

## *Introduction*

In chapter 1 of the book, titled “Passing Go,” Colonna talks about his growing up as one of seven children in a two-bedroom apartment on the ground floor of a small Brooklyn building owned by his grandfather. He tells his money story using the game Monopoly as his life’s metaphor. He loved the game not only because he felt great about amassing money, but because he was able to surprise people with what he was capable of doing. For Colonna, money was safety and his pursuit of money was a way of escaping poverty, chaos, and the streets of his childhood. He describes his financial pursuits and how, for him, money and success meant admiration, acknowledgment, and accolades as ends unto themselves. Colonna also talks about how becoming rich would lead him to thoughts about suicide and how, through a process of radical self-inquiry, he found his way to his own truest self.

At the end of the chapter, Colonna suggests a series of questions to help his readers confront their own money stories and how their belief systems around money from earliest childhood shaped their chosen careers, their definitions of success and failure, their view of the value of other people’s work, and even their own sense of worthiness. While Colonna addresses other critical areas around leadership and growth in his book, he begins with money—the most basic element in the hearts and minds of the leaders he is trying to inspire, change, and ultimately transform.

It appears that Jesus and Jerry Colonna are on the right track. Our attitudes about money do tell us a lot about who we are

and how we function in our family, our church, and the world. Moreover, in a very real sense, our personal money story and our faith journey often overlap. Money permeates everything we do, including how we struggle to live as faithful Christians. In many situations it is often difficult to determine where the money legacy ends and where the spiritual journey begins. For this reason, it is high time to tell our own money stories in our local faith communities and encourage our siblings in Christ to do the same. Quite frankly, as followers of Jesus, pilgrims on the journey, and would-be disciples, we have no other choice. Yes, money is all of our business.

In addition to our personal lives, money is critical to our life as a congregation. It keeps the lights on, pays the clergy and other staff, and enables us to engage in our mission and ministry. Churches, like individuals, also participate in our consumer society and are judged, both within and outside ecclesial structures, on the basis of budgets and wealth. Therefore, we also need to talk about money and our relationship with it as a community of faith. How we spend our money as a congregation indicates our priorities and says more about who we are than any mission statement or strategic plan.

Each of us has a personal money story that developed early in life and stems from our family of origin. This legacy shapes our attitudes about money even as we age, including how we spend it, save it, and give it away. Consequently, our economic status as children often determines our approach to money during our entire lives even if our personal financial situation changes over time. This may be especially true for people who

## *Introduction*

grow up with a feeling of scarcity or economic insecurity and later achieve a greater level of financial success. Similarly, economic privilege as a child often stays with us although our financial condition may diminish.

Like other individual attributes, people bring their money personalities to their adult relationships, their workplaces, and even their volunteer and avocational activities. In the church context, for example, each member of the vestry or other administrative council, finance, or property committee brings their money legacy to the table, which may affect how they approach a particular issue or concern and even how they make decisions. Given this reality, the collective money stories of individual members, especially leaders, can profoundly affect the larger parish enterprise.

Furthermore, individual parishes and congregations, especially those with a wealthy historical past, also have money legacies that shape their attitudes and spending habits even when their demographics and financial circumstances change. As with individuals, a congregation's financial management and budgeting practices are developed over time and reflect spending priorities that often span generations. For this reason, congregations also need to tell their money stories to examine possible unhealthy relationships or experiences with money in the past, and, more importantly, use money in effective and spiritually healthy ways for current and future ministry.

We cannot talk about money from either a personal or congregational point of view without acknowledging the significant



impact of COVID-19. As we continue to navigate the new circumstance, we need to appreciate the economic impact of the pandemic on many of our churches and their members. While some segments of the population have been affected more than others, this experience has and will continue to be part of our money legacies, even for those of us who prospered during this dark period. Furthermore, we are only beginning to discern the long-term impact on church membership, attendance, and active participation. While health and safety concerns have been the priority, economic consequences are also critical both now and moving forward.

This book is intended to help faith communities encourage and facilitate a process for both individuals and the congregation as a whole to confront their money legacies, share their ongoing money stories, and develop more healthy and life-giving attitudes about the role of money in the Christian context. I will begin by telling my own money story growing up in a blue-collar family and living with an immigrant grandmother who had a profound influence on my attitude toward work, self-sufficiency, thrift, and generosity. Next will come the money stories, as I know them, of some of the parishes I have been affiliated with throughout the years and how their financial legacy has impacted their mission and ministry. Last, I will encourage you to do the same sort of storytelling and provide some suggestions on how to begin and sustain this process.

I realize that conversations about money are challenging, if not taboo, especially among people of faith. Consequently, as

## *Introduction*

we embark on this journey together, let us do so thoughtfully and prayerfully, and without judgment or guilt. Our money legacies and ongoing money stories are essential keys to who we are as individual Christians and Christian communities. They help form and shape who we are and what we do. During this time of incredible uncertainty and change in the church and the world, these conversations may also be a way of grounding us and focusing us on the work of the gospel and how we respond to God's call in this time and place.