

Checkbook revelations

by [L. Gregory Jones](#) in the [February 3, 1999](#) issue

Would you come and lead a series of classes on sexuality, drawing particularly on our denomination's statement on sexuality?" Such was the request from the leader of a congregation's adult Sunday school class. Even though I normally am predisposed to accept such invitations, it did not take me long to decline this one.

I said that in our cultural and ecclesial climate, sexuality is a topic almost guaranteed to generate heat without providing light. I suggested that most congregations, including theirs, needed first to learn how to discuss less divisive issues. If members could develop habits of sustaining a community of discernment over less controversial concerns, then perhaps they would be equipped to grapple with the more explosive issues.

The leaders seemed intrigued by my suggestion, and we agreed that I would do a series on cultivating a community of discernment. The first session focused on a rather curious passage in Ephesians (4:25-5:1). Stephen Fowl at Loyola College titled a reflection on this passage, "How to Make Stealing Possible." He noticed that, in the midst of a passage which seems to focus on how people talk with one another, there is an injunction that "those who are stealing should give up stealing." What could that mean? Is it simply an odd interpolation? After all, the passage reads well, and perhaps even better, if the verse is removed. Or does the verse fit within the larger context of the passage and of the letter as a whole?

In Fowl's view, the key is found in the passage's framing reference: "We are members of one another." When people hold things in common, the risk of stealing become greater--for there is a chance that some will take advantage of the others and not carry their share of the burden. Hence the verse includes an injunction that those who give up stealing should "labor and work honestly with their own hands, so as to have something to share with the needy." In Fowl's suggestive phrase, we make stealing "possible" by cultivating a common life in which we truly depend on one another. There is heightened risk, but also the heightened possibility for holy living in which all contribute to the sustenance of the common good.

I presented this perspective to the class, noting that the Ephesians passage presumes that we are sharing enough of our resources to make stealing possible. Is that true of this class, I asked. I offered a proposal: all members of the class (including me) should bring our checkbooks to class the following week so that we could compare what we are actually doing with our resources. Unsurprisingly, and with no small measure of relief on my part, my suggestion was met with a stony silence. No one wanted to take up my proposal. Why not?

In part, I think, it is because we are so accustomed to thinking that economic matters are private. We do not believe that we should be expected to reveal how much we earn, much less how we spend it. Curiously, we seem more willing to divulge information about our sexual attitudes and behaviors than our stewardship. This is certainly true in our television culture of exposure, where talk shows are filled with people disclosing bizarre sexual behavior, but where standards of compensation and stewardship are rarely subjected to scrutiny.

It is also true in the church. There seems to be an implicit agreement among many clergy and laity that, apart from the annual stewardship Sunday that is necessary in order to underwrite the budget, economic matters are personal and private in nature and are unrelated to the corporate, public life of Christians. Hence I had mentioned a taboo subject in proposing that the members of the Sunday school class show their checkbooks to one another.

Yet, ironically, Christians are at least dimly aware that the Bible--and Jesus in particular--seems far more interested in money than sex. Jesus goes so far as to say, "Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also." In another story, the rich young ruler walks away sad, because he had many possessions to which he was more attached than he was to God.

Could it be that we are afraid to open our checkbooks because we know that they reveal far more than how we spend our money? That they indeed reveal our hearts, our conflicted desires, the god(s) whom we really worship?

To be sure, if we lack a common life and exist as strangers to one another--even in our church, even in our Sunday school classes--then revealing our checkbooks to one another is probably too much as a first step. We would become vulnerable too quickly, and open ourselves to the potential of voyeurism and gossip that destroys communities and lives. Even so, first steps are desperately needed--and they need

to be made from the pulpit, in our meetings, in the expectations we create for one another as "members of one another" within the church community.

During our conversations in the Sunday school class about what our checkbooks might reveal, one of the members made an interesting observation. She noted that we find it relatively easy to talk about sexuality--in particular, such issues as adultery and homosexuality--because most of us in churches do so without fear that the discussion will require us to change our lives. Yet, she observed, it is very difficult for us to talk about our own economic practices because--particularly in a relatively wealthy congregation--the discussion would likely implicate us all in a call to repentance.

Her conclusion was insightful: perhaps our lives would be deeper and richer if we began to talk with one another about matters with which all of us need to struggle, whether that struggle be with abundance or crippling poverty. For those of us who would have to be judged among the world's wealthy, money matters call us to reexamine and change our lives. After all, Jesus was interested in our money only because he was interested in our life.