

Money advice from a scrapper

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Recently a friend came to me for financial advice. I was stunned, because... well... we don't have money. We have a home. We have equity. We have retirement savings. We have a plan to send our daughter to college. But, our day-to-day lives are lean. There have been a couple bountiful years here and there, but for the most part, we have to be careful.

Why ask the person with no money for financial advice?

Then I realized he didn't need financial advice from someone who had a lot of money. He needed it from those of us who are scrappers and still maintain a good life.

So, I'm blogging about it.

Confront our monsters. Most of my financial distress comes from an attitude. When I get anxious about money, I ignore it. I tuck my money conundrum into the back of my head like it's a cute tiny amphibious thing. Then, it feeds back there, until it gets big and ugly. Then when it needs more food, it crawls out of the back recesses of my swampy mind, and I can no longer ignore it because it's so scary.

We can't hide stuff from ourselves—interest rates, what we owe, what we will owe, how much we spend, etc. We must face our swamp thing, even if it makes us feel like depressed failures who will never be as good as our rich brother.

God is for us, so we don't need to feel like depressed failures. When I graduated from seminary, I had worked my tail off, juggling multiple jobs, but I still had debt. When I went to my first call in a small rural parish, my salary was far below what I needed to live and pay off the debt. I began to pray the prayers of the people of Israel, wandering in the desert:

Oh Lord, why did you bring us out here to *die*?

Perhaps I was a little melodramatic, but it was painful to be deeply and beautifully called to a place and then come to the realization that I didn't have enough money to make it there.

I began to chant the words of Karl Barth instead:

God is for us.

Now, I am not trying to pawn off some prosperity gospel crap on you. I'm not saying that your bank account reflects how much Jesus loves you. What I am saying is that there is a basic difference of attitude between "God has brought us out here to die" and "God will provide manna and (look at that!) our shoes don't wear out." I don't know why, but knowing that *God is for us* matters.

Don't expect your congregation to understand. The median age of a lot of our congregations is over 60. You might or might not be in your 60s. I don't know. But what I do know is that each generation has its own financial issues. I don't know what it's like to be on the verge of retirement. Other people don't know what it's like to have massive student loan debts.

Many of us serve affluent areas, or we serve people who are at the end of their careers. They may be living in homes they bought at the beginning of their careers for 30K and now the house is worth 1M. They can't understand why you can't move into the neighborhood when they pay you 28k. It would probably take you 30 years to pay off the downpayment. This can be incredibly frustrating. Shrug it off. Be forgiving. They simply don't understand.

- **Tithe.** If it's at all possible, give 10%. If you can't give 10% (and sometimes we can't, because our housing costs outweigh our salaries so much), then try hard to work your way up to it. This isn't just spiritual advice. Tithing will help you be more aware of what you spend, and it will help the overall generosity of the congregation.
- **Spend money on a house.** If there is any possible way to buy a home, then do it. I do know pastors who were caught in terrible situations when the housing bubble burst. But (I hope) that was an anomaly. For the most part, the best way for pastors to have enough to retire is to put money into a house.
- **Don't spend money on cars.** I will usually buy a Honda. I bought a new one last time, my first new car ever. I think I will buy a new one next time, if I can, because

it's lasted way longer. I will drive the car until it dies. The front bumper falls off? I keep driving. Also, we only have one car at a time, when it's possible.

- **Don't eat out.** This is *so hard*, especially when we have evening meetings. I used to hate chomping on carrots while everyone in the office went out to lunch, but there's no better way to cut expenses.

- **Try not to put anything on credit cards.** I never had CC debt, until I entered into the ordination system. I had to travel for meetings. I didn't have enough cash to buy the plane tickets, so I would put it on CC to be reimbursed. The pattern continued until we were putting everything from office supplies to, well, the entire budget of planting a church on our CC. I was traveling 3-4 times a month and the reimbursement system became way too much for us to manage. I finally had to put a stop to it. We simply could not carry the burden of the church's debt any longer. I don't know why, but I still feel extremely embarrassed when I have to tell people I cannot put things on my CC, but that's the way it goes.

- **Set a daily budget.** We used to do everything monthly (I have X amount of money to spend this month), but it was too hard to keep track of. Then we went to weekly (I have X amount of money to spend this week), but even that was too difficult. Now we have a daily budget. We can't go over X amount each day. What if we need to go over X amount? Then we have to wait until tomorrow, when we have 2X to spend.

- **Don't be ashamed.** For a long time, our seminary expenses outweighed our salaries, and no one was talking about it. Now we are. Admissions directors have criticized me for being so vocal about the issue.

But, we all have to confront our monsters.