

“REMEMBERING WHY”

Psalms 145:1-4, 10-18; Matthew 22:15-22, 34-40

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Stewardship season in the church sometimes prompts negative reactions from folks who don't think of money as an appropriate topic for sermons. Pastors hear this a lot: We should stick to spiritual matters. We should be preaching the Bible, not talking about money in church. The folks who say these things mean well, but don't understand how impossible their wish is: in fact, the Bible mentions money some 800 times, and Jesus himself talked about money and related issues *a lot* – so much that it's difficult to ignore. An example is this story from Matthew's gospel, which describes a conversation that took place, in fact, in the temple.

Read Matthew 22:15-22, 34-40

It's not news to us that people have differences of opinion over taxes. We have them today – are they good for our society or bad for the economy? Are they an imposition or a matter of shared responsibilities? We see those differences at the founding of our country, as loyalists supported paying taxes to the British crown while the patriots objected to taxation without representation. They had them in Jesus' world too: even among his fellow Jews taxes were a contentious issue. The Herodians supported paying the taxes levied by the Roman Empire. Their party had chosen cooperation with the Romans, in the interests of stability and security. The Pharisees were far less supportive of the Roman occupation and had religious objections to the taxes besides. They found the coins with which the taxes had to be paid offensive because they were stamped not just with the emperor's image but with words that declared the emperor divine. The circumstances and issues at play were far different from ours, and parallels are difficult to draw ... but the tensions that accompany questions of taxes and money in general are pretty familiar.

What's interesting is that the Herodians and the Pharisees – normally enemies – are united in their suspicions of Jesus, and come together to try and trip him up over this ever-controversial topic. If he sides with the Pharisees, the Herodians can accuse him of being anti-Roman – a dangerous thing to be. If he sides with the Herodians, the Pharisees can claim he's a Roman-sympathizer and maybe even guilty of blasphemy; most of his fellow-Jews would turn against him.

But Jesus sidesteps the either-or choice. He moves the question from a simple choice between two sides to something requiring deeper discernment. He asks a question of his own: “Whose head and title are on this coin?” And he leaves the decision out there as one that requires further reflection: “Give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar, but give to God what belongs to God.” Those who are listening to him have to wrestle for themselves with the questions about what belongs to each.

When we hear this, we generally interpret it as Jesus providing a tidy way of defining two different sets of obligations, separate but side-by-side, that both have a claim on us. It sounds a bit like the way we talk about “separation of church and state” but also at the same time embrace the phrase “God and country.”

But I don't think this is quite what Jesus is driving at. When did Jesus ever offer a simple and neat solution that offends nobody? We probably should be looking for the contrast and tension, for the warning in his words. There are competing loyalties here, and Jesus knows it. He's not trying to smooth over those tensions; he's saying, "Don't confuse those loyalties; don't forget which is greater."

When Jesus asks about the coin, his question is literally "whose *image* is on this coin?" The word is εἰκόν ... and is equivalent to the Hebrew word in Genesis 1 where we are told that human beings were created in the *image* of God.

Caesar can claim these coins for taxes and tribute because they bear his image, Jesus says. But what belongs to God? What bears God's image? WE do. Every human being has God's image stamped on him or her. That means that God has a claim on us.

And so the question of paying taxes or not paying has given way to a deeper question of belonging and identity, to a bigger question of ultimate loyalty.

Give to God what belongs to God – which is to say, give yourself, *all* of yourself, all you are and all you have, to God.

In our baptism, God has claimed us as God's own.
In our baptism, God has told us who we are.

Not only that, throughout our lives we have come to know that we are sustained and surrounded by the amazing grace of God. We have reasons – so many reasons – for gratitude.

Not everybody understands these things, and part of the reason is a culture that equates self-worth with net worth, and offers us even more options for idolatry than the Roman empire offered to its citizens and conquered peoples.

The many Biblical texts referencing money speak to those issues, which are fundamentally spiritual issues. Somehow the bigger and deeper questions about identity, belonging, and loyalty *always* seem to emerge when we reflect on those texts. Our relationship with money is one of the most important – and probably under-addressed – facets of our spiritual life. I'm reminded of Martin Luther, who famously said that people need to be converted in heart, mind and PURSE.

In our Reformed tradition, we have a radical understanding of God's grace. We believe God's grace is paramount. Grace seeks us before we ever begin to seek God. Grace makes everything about our lives and our faith and our church possible. Without God's grace we can do nothing. And yet, that's not to say we are merely passive recipients, without agency or choice. Because God's grace also gives us the gift of freedom and the ability to respond. Our response to grace is gratitude and good stewardship of the gifts we have received.

When we think about stewardship of financial resources, and specifically about giving - whether to the work of the church or another purpose - we think about the needs. We think about the people who are served. The work being done. The challenges. The many costs.

The mission we believe in. The good of the community. The ways we ourselves and those we love benefit.

But that's starting in the wrong place. This story about the argument over taxes reminds us that financial issues of all kinds are issues of identity, belonging, and loyalties. This story reminds us that we need to give. "Give to God the things that belong to God." Start there. We need to give because giving is a way of remembering to whom we belong.

We belong to a God who has just showered us with grace.
We belong to a God who loves us, names us, and claims us.
We belong to a God in whose image we are made
and whose generosity we are intended to reflect.
We belong to a God who asks of us our whole heart, soul, and mind
... all that we are and all that we have.

Giving is about who we are. It's about who we belong to. It's about where our highest allegiance lies. Yes, decisions about giving (like many other decisions about how to use resources in a good-stewardly way) can be challenging, and sometimes they raise complicated issues. The answers are not always clear-cut and everyone's resources and their choices about how to give are not the same. But the spiritual issues are universal.

Giving is as much an act of resistance as of gratitude ... because it is so important in our world to resist the power of money to define us ... because it is so important in our world to resist the ways that money divides us from our neighbors ... because it is so important in our world to resist every equivalent of "divine Caesar" demanding our worship.

Giving is not a cosmic investment that guarantees God will bless us with more wealth; it's an acknowledgement that everything we have really is God's.

Giving is not to get anything, or purchase God's good will; it is simply an indication of willingness to be part of God's work in the world.

Giving is not an obligation on our part; it's a response of gratitude to the grace that we've received.

Giving is not "paying our dues" as much as it is tending our souls.

Giving is as much a spiritual practice as is prayer.

As we give – however we give – today and in the year ahead, I hope that our giving may replenish our spirits, recommit us to the mission of Christ's church, and help us to rediscover the grace of God that holds us. Remember who you are and who you belong to. Give generously ... but always remember why.

Resources:

Articles by Richard E. Spalding and Marvin A. McMickle, in *Feasting on the Word, Year A, volume 4*, eds. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor.

Sermon by Rev. Shannon J. Kerschner, Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago, October 22, 2017.