

Money Sermon

For the next several weeks, we will be talking about stewardship – especially financial stewardship. At some point in stewardship season, it behooves the pastor to deliver what is known in the trade as the “money sermon.” The money sermon usually concludes with an appeal to dig deep, to examine conscience and checkbook, and to increase that paltry annual pledge to something God would be proud of.

For the money sermon, there are several tools in the preacher’s tool bag.

Bribery, for instance: *Tithe and God will reward you.* Cast your bread on the waters and it will return a hundredfold. For examples of this approach, see the internet or most any broadcast by a televangelist.

If bribery feels unseemly, try guilt: *The widow has put her last two coins into the temple treasury. What will you, with all your wealth, contribute?* Guilt works best on older folks – the G. I. generation in particular. Those of us in the baby-boomer set and younger are more or less immune to *noblesse oblige*.

That leaves the appeal to *value for money*, which I have been told in stewardship workshops, is particularly effective for Millennials. For that, the preacher hauls out the brochures and the PowerPoint slides, and brags about the congregation’s superior program. “We’ve got this class for singles, this class for couples, this class for singles who wish there were couples, and this class for couples who wish they were singles.” Etc.

Aware of which side my bread is buttered on, I have used each of these approaches from time to time. Nobody can prove it, however. About ten years ago, I collected all my old stewardship sermons and ran them through the shredder. As theology, they never amounted to much. As bedding for Spikey, the preschool Guinea pig of blessed memory, they proved remarkably absorbent.

The problem, you see, is the Gospel. The Gospel has this infuriating habit of undermining appeals to give more to the church based on greed, guilt, or superior programming.

It’s not that Jesus had little to say about money. He said a great deal about money. One scholar has estimated that if the average preacher talked about money as often as Jesus did, a full third of all sermons would feature the subject.

No, the problem is, Jesus put money in context. In a way, money didn't matter to Jesus. He seems not have had much of his own. Whatever he did have was kept by Judas in the common purse. In another way, money was very important to Jesus, because it speaks volumes about our relationship with God.

Take, for instance, today's encounter with the Pharisees. The Pharisees have a money question for Jesus – a trick question. They begin with a complement so smarmy, it could have come from a cabinet meeting of the current administration.

In a few weeks, I'm going to preside at the wedding of Dillon Geradine. I baptized Dillon. Dillon's all grown up now, but I remember when he and his four brothers used to occupy an entire pew. One morning after worship, the young Dillon shook my hand and said, "Boy, Mr. Copeland, that was a good sermon. You sure are a good preacher."

I was touched. "Well, thank you, my boy. One tries."

"Mr. Copeland, may I ask you something?"

"Certainly, son. You can ask your pastor anything."

"Would you like to buy some Boy Scout popcorn?"

"Teacher we know that you are sincere, and teach the way of God in accordance with the truth, and show deference to no one; for you do not regard people with partiality." (Yeah, right!) "Tell us what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor or not?"

Jesus' opponents have just played out enough rope for him to hang himself several times over. If he says "Yes," he brands himself as a collaborator with the forces of occupation. If he says "No," he declares himself an enemy of Caesar. So he says to the Pharisees,

"Wouldn't have one of those idolatrous coins on you, would you?"

"Sure, here you go!" (Ooops!)

"Tell me, whose image is on this coin and what's that title there in the small print?"

"That would be Caesar's face, and the title seems to be something like *divus et pontifex maximus* – god and high priest.

“Uh, huh. Well then, give back to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and give back to God the things that are God’s.’

It’s a brilliant move. Jesus gets his opponents to admit that they aren’t really concerned about what’s lawful from a religious perspective. They’re supposedly pious Jews walking around with an image of Caesar in their pocket. Then he answers their question in such a way that anybody with a lick of Bible knowledge knows that he is being ironic.

“Give back to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s . . .”

“The earth is the Lord’s and the fullness thereof, the world and those who dwell therein” (Ps. 24:1).” Caesar doesn’t own a thing – at least nothing that really counts. Caesar *claims* to own a share of Israel’s wealth, but that’s because God lets him get away with it for the time being. The Emperor also claims to be a god, but any kid in Hebrew school knows better than that.

The Emperor has no clothes. The Emperor has no leg to stand on. The Emperor is merely the Emperor.

“Give him what he asks for,” Jesus is saying. It’s only money with his own image stamped on it. But don’t give in to his claims. Remember Genesis 1: **“God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.”** *Before* Caesar stamped his image on that coin, God stamped God’s image on Caesar. Before Caesar, before the state, even before the church, we belong to God. **“Render to God the things that are God’s.”**

Bottom line (as the bean counters are wont to say): *it all belongs to God*. The earth, the heavens, the heights and depths. The money in our pockets, the time on our clocks, the hearts that beat within our chests, the blood that courses through our veins. It’s all God’s. You and I belong to God, and so do our pocketbooks. Not to Caesar. Not to America. Not to the capitalist free enterprise system. To God.

Financial stewardship is really quite simple. We just have to figure out how much of God’s money to allocate to each area of life under God’s sovereign rule.

The state should have some money. Government, after all, is a good thing, despite the politicians who get elected by complaining about what a bad thing government is. (I’ve never quite figured that one out.)

The poor should have some money. God’s special concern for the poor is a fundamental theme in Scripture.

Yes, and we should allocate some money for things like housing, clothing, food, education, and enjoyment of the good gifts of life. Jesus was not accused of being a glutton and a drunkard because of his personal austerity program.

One year at Montreat, the preacher, John Bell, had us stop in the middle of a service and make a list of all the meals Jesus took part in. It's a very long list. After reading it out, John asked, "Tell me. Why is Jesus is always portrayed by artists as being so skinny?"

It all belongs to God, and, within limits, we may enjoy "the gifts of God for the people of God." Stewardship is a eucharistic enterprise. It's less about rules than it is about thanksgiving.

How much money should you give to the church? To answer that, remember three things:

First, *it's not your money*. It's God's money.

Second, *it's not about obligation*. It's about grace. I love the old language of the *Book of Church Order*, which says that deacons are called "to cultivate the grace of liberality." We, who have received so much, have so much to give. *The grace of liberality*.

Last, remember this: *It's not a trick question*. The Pharisees tried to trap Jesus with a trick question. Should we pay taxes? Should we tithe? Should we increase the percentage of income we give next year?

I have my own answer for all those questions. Yes!

But that's not the Gospel's answer. The Gospel says it all belongs to God. Paul wrote to the Corinthians, "**Give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver**" (2 Cor. 9.7).

God loves the other kind, too. God loves the world. And that, beloved, is Good News for everyone.