

Dreaming the Dream, Empowering the Vision

Preached by

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For reflection: *If you give what can be taken, you are not really giving. Take what you are given, not what you want to be given. Give what cannot be taken.* Idries Shah

Gospel Reading : Matthew 22:15-22

Then the Pharisees went and plotted to entrap him in what he said. So they sent their disciples to him, along with the Herodians, saying, "Teacher, we know that you are sincere, and teach the way of God in accordance with truth, and show deference to no one; for you do not regard people with partiality. Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?" But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, "Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites? Show me the coin used for the tax." And they brought him a denarius. Then he said to them, "Whose head is this, and whose title?" They answered, "The emperor's." Then he said to them, "Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's." When they heard this, they were amazed; and they left him and went away.

Sermon: Dreaming the Dream, Empowering the Vision

Today is stewardship dedication Sunday—the day when we commit our gifts to God for another year in ministry. We have talked about our money and gratitude and today is another day for giving thanks for what we have received and celebrating the sharing of it.

As we approached today, this text has been nagging at me, even though I don't much like it. While it's always nice to see the hero elude the traps of those who would bring him down, if all we are looking for is a Lord and Savior who is a debate champion, we're not looking for much and we won't get much. There are many recorded exchanges between Jesus and challengers, or followers or potential followers, where he answered wisely; where he evaded a trap; or met a challenge. Yet in none of those exchanges was Jesus satisfied with responding only to opponents—there is always a word for his followers—that would be a word for us.

On this occasion, the Herodians walked away satisfied that Jesus wasn't going to tell people not to pay taxes. We should probably walk away a little less satisfied—or less complacent, at any rate.

If we want to be entirely literal—which this congregation never is, and Jesus rarely was, we might point out that all of our money has dead people on it, and so we don't have to give the money to anyone—the government or God. That would be a specious—or—a really bad pun – specie argument.

Yet, there is another image in the subtext of the story. If those things imprinted with the emperor's image belong to the emperor, then to Whom belong those beings imprinted with the image of the Creator. We are those creatures and we belong to God. It is part of the catechism of our faith that in life and death we belong to God. We know that all that we have and are comes to us from God – our whole world and existence bear the identifying marks of the One who made all things.

Yet often we resist acting on the truths we mouth. We excuse ourselves from generosity or even response, by saying to ourselves and others, "Surely we are not called to hand it all back – the means of providing food and shelter and clothing; the dollars for education. Surely we are not expected to hand it all back including our lives themselves, everyone to be priests or pastors, nuns, saints, martyrs, or 24/7 church volunteers." Neither the people of our God nor our God call for that.

This text demands something far more difficult. It requires that we think and pray as we consider where our loyalties lie; and how we express those loyalties; how we live in two kingdoms at once, and the highly specific question of how we, who are imprinted with the image of God and bear the name of God's son, handle our money. Being made in the image of God and being called to live out that image can be more challenging than we first assume and more challenging than we might like. However, as they say, "It is what it is."

These questions are between us and our God and also among us as a community of God. If we have come to think of money as one of the things that is a matter of conscience between us and our forgiving God—meaning our gracious God has lower expectations of us than our fellow humans, then we have missed about 60% of what Jesus had to say – not 60% of what Jesus had to say about money but what he had to say about everything. That would mean 31 stewardship sermons every year. We always want to be more Jesus-like, but maybe not that much.☺

Some people say they "only hear from the church when it wants money" or "that's all it talks about." If those statements were mostly true, it would mean there no weekly emails, notices about the deaths of members, newsletters, bulletins, notes from the pastor, pastoral care calls from the pastor or committee, holiday or other encouraging cards, or healing meals. That would mean there are no opportunities for or reports of mission work, fellowship, or education. That would mean that the Board hasn't worked very hard to greatly reduce extra-budgetary requests for special offerings, all of which go to mission and occur on 6 Sundays per year. So, if any of us have the perception the church is all about money, this is an invitation to don corrective lenses.

One of the messy details of living a life of faith is money is necessary to carry out our ministry. Whether we are in the midst of a formal process as with our refresh desserts, retreats on change, and exploration of ideas for the future or not, we always have dreams about what our congregation should be, can be and might be. It is one thing to open our minds to God's imaginative dreams; it is another to empower the resulting vision. In the real world—that is the world in which we and the church live, money and human commitment, talent and energy are both engine and fuel for bringing the vision of how we are Christ's body in the world to life.

This particular part of Christ's body has identified itself as a congregation which operates from a historic building, sustains a significant music ministry, has responsive leadership, provides education for all ages, welcomes and includes newcomers and people of all backgrounds, colors, orientations, political and social beliefs, and gathers weekly for nurturing challenging spiritual worship and companionable fellowship. From that core of faith development and spiritual strength, we reach out to the world demonstrating Christ's compassion and reflecting God's image with which we are imprinted.

It takes money to maintain this model of Christian ministry—the use of which is reflected in the draft budget everyone received. We are aware, both practically and pastorally, of those among us who are living on a fixed budget and, while we do ask people to be responsible to the promises they have made, we never place pressure on anyone to give or give more.

The congregation, however, cannot live on a fixed budget because costs go up all the time – although our Board has come as close as humanly possible to maintaining a fixed budget. That budget isn't the Board's budget. It is the congregation's budget. In support of the thesis that it is the congregation's budget, at thesis, I will mention that no one has ever responded to the stewardship mailing by saying, "Let's donate all the money set aside for utilities or snow plowing to mission; we can wear coats in worship and ski up the hill from our cars. We don't need anyone to answer the phones; let's not have emails or bulletins; or we don't really need any music besides what's printed in the hymnals – the choir can sing from them. Let's give all that money to mission instead." In fact, this congregation donates a significant portion of its income to partners and people in need, and it has been a rising percentage, thanks, in part, to coffeehouse receipts and distributions.

The text and the times require that we not accept easy answers or make our own glib responses.

They require that we seriously prayerfully reflect on what it means to be made in the image of God and how Jesus' calls us to give to God what belongs to God and that includes our money – regardless of how little or how much we have.

How we choose and when what we choose in our spending will determine the image of God the world sees through our life together. Will they see people satisfied with slick and easy answers; the brutal caesars who walk away once their own agenda is satisfied? Or—will they see God's faithfulness and God's generosity? Will they see a people who live as we have been called to live since the dawn of creation, not going it alone, but bound by promises to live in loving holy relationships, which are also occasionally contentious, often challenging relationships with other fallible human beings? Will they see Christ's sacrificial love for the sake of the whole world? Will they see Christ's compassion for the poor, the sick, the mourning and those who are exiled from society?

Will they see that we truly believe God is the giver of all that we have and is the securer of our lives? Will they see the depth of our gratitude for all that we have received and all that we regularly thank God for.

When they look at us will they see the image of God, by Whose grace and good power we live and move and have our being and by whom we are empowered to be Christ's body in the world? Will they see a people who are willing and able to give flesh and heart and hands and feet to the vision we proclaim? The pledges we make, the gifts we give, and the service we offer will determine Who they see when they look at us.

Prayers for Others and Ourselves

Compassionate God: This day, we pray for a world in need:

A world where fear and panic can override thought, hospitality and good judgment

Where disease strikes terror

Where the power of your creation still strikes us silent with awe and moves our hearts in response to the disruption of human lives

Where war ravages lives

Where violence begets violence

Where trust is a fragile thing or doesn't exist at all

With your gift of faith to us, with trust in you and empowered by your spirit may we be bearers of calm, safety and peace in the places where we learn and teach, tend and heal, work and serve

We pray as Christ taught us to pray