

In the Name of Jesus. Amen.

This morning's Gospel reading contains three things people aren't supposed to talk about in polite company – money, politics, and religion. So let me ask first: why is it that we're not supposed to talk about these things in the church? I remember, shortly after arriving to a new Call, being told by one parishioner who made a special trip to my office just to tell me this: "If you preach about money, my family and I will leave this church." I said, "Well, since Jesus talked about money, I'll be talking about it from time to time, too, whenever it comes up in our weekly Scripture readings." I don't think he was expecting that response, and he simply shook his head as he walked out of my office. He and his family, however, did not leave the church. He became congregational president, and a very fine one.

So, what is that about? Despite the fact that most people want the sermon to help them understand how their faith touches and informs their daily life, how what God was up to in the Biblical story connects with their own life story now, why is it there are often strong negative feelings when the topic of money is raised in sermons? Explanations such as, "It's my money and it's no one's business what I do with it, certainly not the church's;" and "Money is such a personal thing, it's just not right to talk about it in public" are common – even though I don't *ever* remember hearing a sermon, or a congregational meeting, ask a single soul to divulge their income, their financial net worth, or their spending habits publicly. Not once. I've *never* heard an invasion of *anyone's* privacy in this regard. Our attitude toward, and use of money is *precisely* a matter of daily life. Billy Graham said it this way: "Every person's checkbook [today we might say, credit card statement] is a theological document. It tells you who and what they worship." Another person put it this way: "Show me your calendar and your checkbook [or credit card statement], and I'll show you what's really important in your life."

Maybe that factor is why we get a bit ouchy when we talk about our money in church.

...as did the much of the Jewish leadership in Jesus' time. The Herodians, in this morning's reading, held political power, and most scholars believe that they were a political party that supported King Herod Antipas, ruler over much of the land of the Jews at the time of Jesus, appointed by the Roman Empire. The Herodians favored submitting to the Herods, *and therefore to Rome*, for political expediency. The Herods, of which there are several mentioned in the New Testament, were part of a ruling dynasty. Unlike other previous kings of Israel, the Herods were Jews appointed by the Roman emperors and the senate to serve as more or less puppet kings, serving the purposes of Rome. This support of Rome compromised Jewish independence in the minds of the Pharisees, making it difficult for the Herodians and Pharisees to unite and agree on anything. But, as so often happens in politics yet today, one thing did unite them—opposing something; in this case, Jesus.

The tax in question in the Herodians' and Pharisees' little "test" for Jesus, was the Imperial tax paid as tribute to Rome. Similar to income tax today. This tax supported the Roman costs of their occupation of Israel. In other words, first-century Jews were required each year to pay their oppressors a denarius – equivalent to one day's labor -- to support *their own oppression*. To make matters worse, the Jews had to pay this tax in Roman currency, with a coin engraved not only with a picture of the Roman Caesar Tiberius, but also with this inscription on the flip side: "Caesar Augustus Tiberius, son of the Divine Augustus", claiming that Augustus and Tiberius were gods. This forced Jewish people to break the first two Commandments (according to the

Ten Commandments as listed in Exodus) – 1) You must not have any other gods except me; and 2) You must not make for yourselves an idol; You must not worship or serve any idol...

Shortly after the great public display of support and adoration of Jesus on Palm Sunday, wanting to disgrace Jesus in public and take the steam out of his rising popularity, the Pharisees and the Herodians tried to trap Jesus into a no-win answer to their question. If Jesus *publically supported* paying the tax, he would offend all of those who opposed it; if he *publically didn't* support the tax, he would be in danger of being arrested by Roman officials for treason.

But Jesus is not easily trapped, being even more shrewd than his enemies. He asks a revealing question: “Whose image is on the coin?” Underlying the question is an indictment. The Jews never dealt in Roman currency, except when paying this abhorrent tax. They would *never* carry around those blasphemous coins. So...*why* were the Herodians carrying them? The Herodians know full well whose face and proclamation of divinity is on that coin. Having them at all exposes the Herodians’ support of Rome and their knowing and willing betrayal of the first two commandments. They are now caught in their own trap.

Then Jesus says: “Give to Caesar what is Caesar’s, and to God what is God’s.” At first hearing, this sounds like an easy equation, until you try to do the math. It’s pretty clear what “belongs to Caesar.” But, the Herodians (and we) get stymied when we try to determine what belongs to God. The question inevitably becomes, what *doesn't* belong to God? Not only all of creation belongs to God, but our very lives, our souls, belong to God. As the creator of heaven and earth and all that is in them, God *owns* it all! The Jews may have been unwilling citizens of Rome, but they did not *belong* to Rome. Was the first element of their identity the country they were citizens of; with their religion and ethnicity being the second? Or vice-versa?

What Jesus was saying to the crowd and to us is: we are first and forever the deeply loved children of God, members of God’s family, and citizens of God’s kingdom. We belong to God. Secondly (at best), we are citizens of a human-created nation – although many of us might put being members of a family, and of a community of faith ahead of that. But first and foremost, we are children of God and we belong to God. Jesus is saying that *that* identity guides our behavior as we seek to become all God has created and calls us to be, and it is *that* identity which secures our future.

Jesus doesn’t give them or us a simplistic answer about paying or not paying taxes. It’s not strictly a matter of whose image is on the coin; it’s a matter of *in whose image we are created*. When we keep *that* blessing front and center of our self-understanding, or our identity, then every aspect of our life has the potential to be sacred – not just how we regard our money and how we choose to spend it.

You see, what Christ is teaching here is this: What we call “stewardship” isn’t a financial issue; it’s a spiritual one. It’s not about “stuff.” It’s about discipleship. God doesn’t *need anything* from us, but God does desire our hearts. As we said a few minutes ago, the way we steward our resources indicates how we manage everything that God gives us, with the prayer that God can use our gifts to transform *us*, and to extend Christ’s transforming love to others through us.

In our weekly offering prayer, what is it we pray? “We offer to you, O God, – with joy and thanksgiving – what you have first given us; *ourselves*, our time, and our possessions.” Notice what is listed first: ourselves. Our very selves. Second? Our time. Our precious time. In some instances of more value than money. And lastly? Our possessions. This ordering illustrates what God truly desires from us: our love, our dedication, our loyalty – US! And *with* that

follows our time, and then our possessions. It's all of a piece. And it isn't all to just flatter a God with an immense ego; but to continue God's will on earth, as it is in heaven.

I'd like us to try a little experiment. Every week, we freely return a portion of what God has given to us to the explicit purposes of God through the ministries of this congregation and the larger ELCA and its many far-reaching ministries. We ask God to receive our offerings and bless them that they may serve God well. But what about what remains in our wallets, our bank accounts or credit cards? This morning, I'd like us to ask God to bless that as well, no matter how much or how little. As we pray over our offerings in the offering plates in a few minutes, I would like you to take out your checkbook, credit card, and or cash, and lift that up to the Lord as well, as we pray. We will pray (as we always do) over *all* that belongs to God – “ourselves, our time, and our possessions” -- all signs of God's gracious love for us. We pray that we regard *all* of it as sacred, as gifts to be experienced and used with joy, generosity, and love. In Jesus' name. Amen.

*Pastor Joan Gunderman, Faith Lutheran Church, Swanburg, MN*