

Year A – Proper 24 ***“Don’t give your money to the Church!”***

*“Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s”
(Matthew 12:15-22)*

Last week I gave you some advice: **“Don’t go to church!”** And this week I have some more advice in the same vein. I don’t think the Vestry is going to like this: **Don’t give your money to the Church!**

This is the time of year when money and the church is very much on my mind. The Finance Committee is working on the 2012 budget. The Stewardship Committee has prepared letters and a new pledge card. We are in the process of getting all the materials to you just so you will understand how important the church is in your life and the life of this larger community and make a significant pledge to the church. George and I are in the process of looking at our own giving for the year and assessing if we’ve made our usual tithe commitment to the church and the other institutions that we believe have a significant impact on the quality of human and divine life on the planet. It’s a time to think, pray and discern about our money.

More than any other single topic in the New Testament, either directly or indirectly, Jesus talks about possessions and money. And our money is something that we don’t like to talk about. We’d rather talk about sex, which Jesus never addresses!

Our public discourse, of course, is almost always about money – taxes, budgets, expenditures, executive salaries, corporate profits. We want to keep our money for ourselves but have lots of services provided for us at the same time. And our own money – how much we have, how much we make each year, what we do with it, is our own business.

Of course, we all have different histories with money. When I was growing up my parents rarely talked about money. I was aware that we didn’t have much and they had to carefully budget and stretch each pay check. But I always had a home, food on the table, and clothes to wear. In due time, I received an allowance which I got to keep and spend on myself. Eventually I added babysitting money to that and learned the practice of saving money – again to spend on myself. Having money meant power, independence and personal decision making. It was something to be worked for, to obtain. Eventually as a young adult and parent it became a necessity for providing for my family and I got a job. There were a few years when I didn’t have enough and had to go on food stamps. Those years have passed and together George and I have grown in our own use of money for greater purposes than our own. But not without struggle and occasional argument!

There are four occasions in the Gospels when Jesus specifically talks about coins: He uses a lost coin as a metaphor for the value of a life lived centered in God; He dumps the coins of the moneychangers in the temple all over the floor; Sitting outside the temple he points to the example of the widow who gives her two coins, percentage-wise, it is more than the richest give – her gift is sacrificial. And then there is the story we heard this morning about the Pharisees, who along with the Herodians (supporters of Herod), seek to trap him in making a choice

between Caesar and God. Whichever choice he makes would condemn him in the eyes of the people or the Roman authorities.

Jesus never ceases to amaze me! I really wish I had his talent for cutting through what appears to be a dilemma and going right to the heart of the issue. Once again, he sidesteps and refuses to fall into the dichotomy that the Pharisees are setting up for him. It's not only that he sees the trap. Jesus sees all of life differently.

What is it about money that is so attractive and yet something that we don't really want to talk about (unless it's someone else's). As Jesus points out, our money is a symbol. It has symbols on it. Our coins have images and sayings, "In God we Trust", that reflect our intent as a nation. But, as individuals our money is symbol of what we have achieved, or not. Without it we can feel less valued by society. At its simplest it is a symbol of the work we have provided. But most of the time we view it as "ours" to use and give as we decide. We have to pay taxes, the rent and buy food and clothing. We have to get to our jobs so we need a car. We have to insure our belongings, and our health, and save a bit for the future and the care of family. Everything else is beyond that. The Church is one of those "everything else's" to which we give our money beyond what we actually need for ourselves. So, today, I'm saying stop that! **Don't give your money to the church!**

Jesus invites us to come at this from a different place. He refuses to see life as "either-or". For Jesus, it's always "both-and". "*Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's*". So what belongs to God? What are we to give to God? What has the image of God planted on it? Human beings, of course! And, therefore, if human beings are made in the image of God and we are to give ourselves to the Living God who made us, redeems us and sustains us, then our work and our money is all a part of that. Everything belongs to the Divine. We come from God. We belong to God. We are destined for God.

In The Gospel of Thomas, Jesus says, "*When you are able to make two become one, the inside like the outside, and the outside like the inside, the higher like the lower, . . . - then you will enter in.*"¹ He is talking about "seeing" and living in the reign of God. Jesus' own view of divine reality is grounded in the material world but "seeing" life as one instead of two. That's how he is able to be so quick to say "*render to the Emperor the things that are the Emperor's and to God the things that are God's*". All things belong to God.

This world that God has created is one that we typically interpret as dualistic. Things are good or bad, black or white, right or wrong, in or out. These are useful discriminations for some things but not for the life of God among us. When we give our money to the Church, we are saying: This is mine and I will share it with this worthy cause or organization. **Don't give your money to the church!**

I want you to give your money to God! Consecrate it to God's mission of reconciliation here and across the planet. Make your gift an offering in the true sense – a part of yourself laid upon the altar.

And today I'm going to make a change in our worship together. First, we will not be taking up a "collection" today. A collection is when you put your money in a plate and it is brought forward and then hidden away for someone to count and deposit in the bank later.

No, I'm going to invite you to participate in the **offering** at the altar to God by placing in the plate a part of yourself. And everyone here is invited, always, to put something in that plate. If you don't put something in the plate you are not represented in the offering. If you want to give some of your money to God, put it in the plate. If you don't have any money with you, write a note of your intent to offer yourself to God and put that in the plate. Maybe you have something else with you that is a symbol of what you want to offer.

As is my custom I will raise the plates in blessing and then, instead of whisking them away, I will place them on the altar to be blessed along with the bread and the wine, as part of our offering to God. And we will be doing that from now on!

Don't give your money to the church! Give it and yourself to God who creates you, loves you like a child and calls you home. Discover the transformation that happens when you give yourself to God and then spread the Good News of God's love in the world.
Amen.

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¹ Logion 22, translation by Lynn Bauman, *The Gospel of Thomas*