

## *The Things That Are God's*

A Sermon Preached by the  
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November 11, 2007  
Oak Grove Presbyterian Church  
Bloomington, Minnesota

Psalm 98  
Luke 20:20-26

There's nothing like coming into a church and preaching the stewardship sermon on your second Sunday in the pulpit! Most of us find it difficult to talk about money with people we know well, so you can imagine how challenging this might be. On the other hand, I've been to a stewardship dinner - which was great fun - and I've attended one meeting of the Budget and Finance Committee - *almost* as much fun. But I couldn't honestly say that I have a handle on the church finances just yet; nor do I know what to expect in terms of response to the stewardship drive. But, as always, I hope to be surprised and amazed when the numbers are totaled up.

As difficult as it is for us to talk about money on a personal level, it always seems to be far more difficult for churches to talk about money - you know the old saying, it's easier to get Presbyterians to talk about sex than it is to get them to talk about money! Nevertheless, it's a necessary part of our life together as a faith community, and today is the day that we have designated as the one when we bring our gifts to God and the day we talk about the stewardship of those gifts.

Having served at a number of churches, quite a few church newsletters continue to arrive in my mailbox each month. This month, not surprisingly, most of them have something about stewardship and the church budget for the coming year.

In one of the incoming newsletters, the pastor wrote this in his monthly letter to the congregation: ". . .the message this time of year is relatively simple: the church needs money, you have some, we'd like part of it - more, in fact than you gave last year if we hope to meet a budget."<sup>1</sup> Short and sweet and certainly to the point.

Thankfully, we all know that it's not just about money. In fact, very little of stewardship is about money. Certainly, the church needs it, you have some, we'd like some, but stewardship is more than the bottom line.

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<sup>1</sup> David Van Dyke, *The Anchor*, House of Hope Presbyterian Church, November 2007, p.

The Gospel lesson that I chose for today is most often read during Holy Week, specifically on Palm Sunday, because it is part of the Gospel that recounts the events of the last week of Jesus' life as he moves toward the final days in Jerusalem. In two of the Gospel accounts Jesus ended the day by turning over the tables of the moneychangers in the temple. And as the week went on, it seemed that Jesus was confronted at every turn by those who were intent upon entrapping him and discrediting him in the presence of the crowds of people who were following him, listening to him, those who were spellbound by what they heard.

And right in the middle of it all comes the money question, the question about paying taxes to the emperor. A little background on this one: when the Jewish homeland was added to the Roman Empire in 63 BCE, Rome imposed an annual "tribute" from the Jewish people. Basically, the tribute was a per capita tax levied on all adult Jewish men, but it was padded with taxes on land and agricultural production. The taxation was economically burdensome to be sure, but it also symbolized the Jewish homeland's lack of sovereignty. It painfully underlined their oppression by the empire.

So the question was asked, "Is it lawful for us to pay taxes to the emperor or not?" If Jesus answered "no," he could be charged with sedition, or denying Roman authority, and promptly arrested. If he answered "yes," he risked discrediting himself with the crowd, who for both economic and religious reasons deeply resented Roman rule and taxation.

Jesus asked if anyone had a *denarius*, a Roman silver coin equal to about a day's wages. And, of course, it was produced, apparently by one of the questioners. And then Jesus asked, "whose head and title is inscribed on this coin?" And we know that the answer was "the emperor's." In their most recent book entitled, *The Last Week*, well-known contemporary theologians Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan suggest that the moment the coin was produced, the questioners were discredited because they were perceived to be part of the politics of collaboration. They write, "In the Jewish homeland in the first century, there were two types of coins. One type, because of the Jewish prohibition of graven images, had no human or animal images. The second type (including Roman coinage) had images. Many Jews would not carry or use coins of the second type. But Jesus' interrogators in the story did. The coin they produced had Caesar's image along with the standard and idolatrous inscription heralding Caesar as divine and Son of God."<sup>2</sup>

"Then give to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's." For Jesus and many of his Jewish

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<sup>2</sup> Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan, *The Last Week*, HarperSanFrancisco: 2006, pp. 64-65.

contemporaries, everything belonged to God. What then belonged to Caesar? The implication is nothing.

Give to God, the things that are God's – and everything belongs to God. Everything belongs to a God who, in turn, is generous beyond measure. Preacher and writer Tom Long says that, "We human beings foolishly squander our treasures in destructive irresponsibility; God, in a wild display of divine foolishness matches our spendthriftiness, throwing love and compassion around like a high roller in Vegas, pouring the divine treasure recklessly into human life, creating vast spaces of freedom and forgiveness and joy."<sup>3</sup>

Stewardship is about how we manage resources – financial and otherwise, ours and the church's – in light of the abundant nature of the God who provides for us. We are called to a stewardship like God's stewardship, which, when all is said and done, is an expression of extravagance. Tom Long goes on to say, "Underlying all acts of stewardship is not a God who wears a green eyeshade and counts pennies, but a God who flings love passionately and imprudently across the human landscape with abandon."<sup>4</sup> Everything belongs to God – and God gives it all away.

For a variety of reasons, it's difficult for us to think in terms of abundance, much less extravagance, when it comes to supporting the church. Of course, we are not all able to tithe or even come close to that kind of commitment. Of course, many of us find other ways to support the church through our time and talents. And we all understand that our financial health, just like our physical or mental health, is not always on an even keel. We all go through periods when we are not able to be as generous as we might like to be, either with our financial resources or our time and talents. But we can all choose to give as we are able, and that's all that's ever asked of us. Extravagance is relative, after all.

"Stewardship is about making choices, as individuals and in community. It is more than giving money to the church. Stewardship is about being faithful disciples, caring for and managing all that God has given us.

"Stewardship is the grateful response to God's grace and goodness. It requires a consideration of how our choices affect us and others, of how we can be good caretakers of the created world, and of how we can best serve God as disciples of Christ."<sup>5</sup>

I'll never forget a conversation about my first church job that I had with my son Richard when he was a teenager, probably a junior or senior in

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<sup>3</sup> Thomas G. Long, "Where's Mine?, *Faithfulness Sustains the Generations*, Vol. 1, Part One, PC(USA) stewardship curriculum.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> PC(USA) Stewardship resources, [www.pcusa.org](http://www.pcusa.org)

high school at the time. It was budget time. I was working a three-quarter time job, the church was hoping to be able to increase it to full-time, but, of course, that depended on the success of the stewardship drive. Rich said, “How does the church get money anyway?” This from a child who grew up in the church and watched the envelope go into the offering plate every Sunday morning – or at least I thought so. But I realized that we had never talked about what we gave to the church or why. We had never talked about stewardship as giving back to God in gratitude for what God had given us. Needless to say, that was what we call a “teachable moment.”

At the end of the day, at the end of the stewardship drive or the capital campaign or the special offerings, we are the church and it’s our money, time, talent, energy and love that pays the light bill and the salaries, that keeps the building open for community groups to gather and provides hospitality for our neighbors. It’s our money, time, talent, energy and love that maintains a beautiful building, supports an amazing music program, and welcomes our children into a loving environment every Wednesday evening.

Years ago now, I ran across a stewardship sermon about the three tithes Israel was expected to pay every year. It took me a while to find it again, and I want to share part of it with you this morning as we think about how our money, time, talent, energy and love is used and what it means to give back in gratitude.

The sermon begins with the same basic concept that everything belongs to God, and we are the careful keepers and users of the blessing. This preacher goes on to talk about the first tithe, “known as the Lord’s tithe, (which) consisted of giving one-tenth annually of (the) seed of the land, (the) fruit of the tree, (the) herd of the flock. . . . Most of this tithe went to support the Levites, who were the professional church staff of the day . . . the ones who preached, taught, healed, helped, listened, and led the celebrations.” He asks, “How do you put a price on pastoral ministry? On skills, energy, leadership, counseling, marriage, funerals, baptisms, preaching, teaching, encouraging you in your ministry, being a presence in the community? How do you put a price on an excellent music program, on works of art magnificently performed to the glory of God? On the skillful work of staff with children, youth, and adults?” How do you put a price on support staff – office managers and secretaries, financial, website and communications staff that keep us on track and in touch with each other? How do you put a price on custodial staff, who do far more than just vacuum and clean the bathrooms. Have you ever counted the number of chairs and tables that get moved around here? Have you ever counted the number of doors to be locked, the number of window sills to be dusted, the rooms that need to be tidied up in anticipation of the next event?

“The second tithe was for payment for gathering the people for the ceremonies and for worship and decision making.” That would correlate to the part of our budget that pays for the ways we gather here – in committee meetings, session, deacons, to discuss and plan and move into action. It goes to per capita, it pays for programs that include education, retreats, travel, stewardship dinners. It provides for space – a place to gather for worship as well as a place to gather for study and fellowship. It pays the light bill, the telephone bill, garbage collection, cleaning supplies, office supplies, postage, and insurance.

“But there was a third tithe, given every three years, and kept in the local community for distribution to the needy. Obviously, this correlates to our mission giving, those dollars that allow us to reach out to all the world, to touch, to lift, to heal, and to love.”

“They brought their offerings willingly, thanking (God) who had been so good to them, who had brought them out of slavery in Egypt, led them through the wilderness, provided for them in all their needs. So they dedicated their time and talents and treasures to this (God) who had so visibly loved them. . . . And they were joyful about it. They did not see it as anything other than an opportunity to rejoice.”<sup>6</sup>

Look around this morning and see how visibly we are loved and blessed by God’s abundance and extravagance. Look around and see all the things that we are able to do and be in the world as a community of faith because of our gratitude for God’s amazing grace. Look around and remember what writer Anne Lamott says about it all, “There are only two prayers: help me, help me, help me, and thank you, thank you.” This is the morning that we get to joyfully say, “thank you, thank you, thank you!” Amen.

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<sup>6</sup> William R. Phillippe, *A Stewardship Scrapbook*,” Louisville, Kentucky: Geneva Press, 1999, pp. 58-66.