

“The Meaning of Money”

October 19, 2008 – Matthew 22:15-22

INTRO: Here we are on the verge of a national election, with taxes and government programs being discussed regularly, and this particular Gospel reading pops up in our lectionary. It is timely, because it too speaks of taxation and the government, and where in the midst of all those loyalties as citizens, we may understand our loyalties to God.

One Sunday, for a children’s story, I brought in my mother’s brown mixing bowl and told a story about it. It’s a piece of McCoy pottery, and I remember that at one point Mother had a set of three or four of these bowls, but by now, the large one is the only one that is left out of the set. I have fond memories of her using this bowl, and she often would make her pineapple salad in it, and take it to family dinners. I’ve used the bowl quite a bit myself, over the years. After the church services that day, one woman advised me that maybe I should check into how much the bowl is worth, because I might want to stop using it for mixing salads and desserts.

I did some investigation, and found that it is a part of the McCoy Amber Ware nested bowls, made in 1962, and that the bowl sets are hard to find. I got my hopes up, and then learned that the one bowl is worth about \$40. The set is long gone, which would probably have added to its value. So, I still use it in my kitchen. And the value of that bowl is not in its financial worth, but that it was something my mother used regularly. It means something to me because it was hers.

If a relative of yours left you an old coin, it might be worth much more than my McCoy bowl. The first national coin was minted in 1776, a pewter dollar based on a design by Benjamin Franklin. That Continental Dollar today is worth at least \$1500.00. I have some bicentennial quarters, from 1976, which I think may be worth about a dollar each if they are in good enough condition. And if we look on the front of those quarters, we find the same phrase that’s on freshly minted quarters: “In God we Trust.” That motto was placed on United States coins largely because of the increased religious sentiment existing during the Civil War. In 1864 Congress approved of this motto for the first time, on a two-cent coin.

And alongside of that motto still today, we find the silhouette of a famous leader on our coins--most of them past US presidents.

When Jesus requested a coin from this gathered crowd, we don’t know quite what it looked like, but it had the image of one of their leaders—an emperor. The Pharisees and some of the followers of King Herod are trying to trap Jesus, when they ask him whether it is right to pay taxes to Caesar or not. If Jesus argues against paying the tax, they can accuse him of anti-Roman activity. And if he supports the tax, he may lose some followers because devout Jews would have questioned whether they were being led to show some kind of worship of a political leader, and that would have been considered blasphemous to them.

Jesus knows that they’re asking about a particular tax and calls for a Roman coin, knowing that the tax can be paid only in Roman currency. With the coin in hand, Jesus asks them whose head is on it, and they admit it’s the emperors.

“By saying that what is already the emperor’s should be given to the emperor, Jesus avoids a direct yes or no response—one that would get him in serious trouble with either the Jews or the Romans. But in answering the way he does, he gives an indirect yes. He implies that paying this tax is not against the Jewish law. But he then goes beyond the question asked by the Pharisees and says that what is God’s, must be given to God. Loyalty to God is on a different and much higher level of importance than earthly loyalty to the emperor.” (*Homiletics*, 10/08)

Jesus is reminding us that there’s more meaning to our money than its face value. A quick evaluation of what money means in our world lately, might find us describing declining housing values, mortgage payments that are beyond people’s abilities to pay, declining retirement plans and college funds, and how to stretch the paycheck to pay all our bills. That’s one way of defining money.

But even in strange financial times, we are faced, like the people in Jesus’ time, of needing to determine what is of ultimate value and ultimate loyalty to us. Precisely in these times we need to do that.

When Jesus told the people that what belongs to God must be given to God, he may have been “referring to human beings as God’s coin, who bear God’s image. Since we are created in the image of God, we belong to God as surely as Caesar’s coins belonged to Caesar.” (Douglas Hare)

“All that we are and have comes from God and is entrusted to our stewardship. Our intellect, energy, compassion, artistic abilities, and our money are gifts given to us by God, to enable us to use them for the greater good of all.” (Ralph Klein)

Jesus’ response may not really solve the problem, but it defines the nature of the struggle. It was not an either/or answer. We can’t simply divide the world up into what is ours and what is God’s, because it’s really all God’s and God is concerned about everything. Jesus knew that “nothing can be the emperor’s without first being God’s.” (Sam Wells)

We live in a world which includes governments and politics and economic realities, and at the same time we need to do our best to be good stewards of all that we have. The private and the public spheres intersect and we have to be vigilant about finding ways that the gospel values are an overlay to the socio political order. “At issue is not merely our economic relationship to the government but our relationship to God.” (Dan Clendenin)

When we look at candidates platforms as we face into upcoming elections, we need to be watching for proposals that widen the gap between the rich and the poor. We don’t need that gap to increase. When we spend money, save money, or give money away, what do our actions say about the place of God in our lives?

At a Wednesday evening church meeting, a very wealthy man rose to give his testimony. “I’m a millionaire,” he said, “and I attribute it all to the rich blessings of God in my life. “I can still remember the turning point in my faith, like it was yesterday: “I had just earned my first dollar and I went to a church meeting that night. The speaker was a missionary who told about his work. I knew that I only had a dollar bill and had to either give it all to God’s work or nothing at all. So at that moment I decided to give my whole dollar to God. I believe that God blessed that decision, and that is why I am a rich man today.”

As he finished, it was clear that everyone had been moved by this man’s story. But, as he took his seat, a little old lady sitting in the same pew leaned over and said: “Wonderful story! I dare you to do it again!” (author unknown)

“Everything we possess has been given to us by our loving God in a wild gesture of generosity. We don’t really own anything ourselves, but instead we care for the things that belong to God for as long as we are allowed to walk this earth. We relish them, we delight in them, we manage them ... but then we let go of them. So why not let go in a way that advances God’s interests?” (*Homiletics*, 10/08)

A Jewish rabbi tells the following story: A minister, a priest and a rabbi were discussing how they made use of the funds in the collection plate. The minister said, "I draw a line on the floor, and I throw the money into the air. Everything that lands to the right of the line is for God, everything on the left is for me." "That's pretty much what I do," said the priest, "but instead of a line, I draw a circle. Everything in the circle is for God, everything outside the circle I keep for myself." "I, too, have a system," said the rabbi. "I take the money and throw it up in the air, and whatever God catches God can keep."

I read the story of a presenter at a stewardship workshop who shared that he makes a point of giving more to his church through his offerings than he gives to the government through his taxes. That is a way he indicates the place of his greater allegiance—who has greater authority over him. (Brian Stoffregen)

Now that may seem a bit astonishing and it be an impossibility for most of us, but it may move us to think about how our giving and spending can express our loyalties.

Whether that McCoy bowl from my mother is worth \$40 or 50 cents, its meaning is not connected to the amount of money I could get for it, but that it reminds me of my relationship to my mother.

The next time we take out a coin, regardless of its monetary value, we may want to think about the more important aspect of that coin—that it is connected to our loyalty to God. For no matter how many coins we have, or how few coins we have, the relationship is important, as we determine how we are going to honor God with our whole lives.

--Sue Burwell