

Your money or your life

Matthew 22:15-22

October 16, 2011

This will not be the sermon it was supposed to be.

I chose the topic for this Sunday's sermon five months ago, when I put together the plan for this fall's sermon series on stewardship. The theme for the series as a whole is this: We are stewards of God's good gifts. God has richly blessed us and we are called to make good and wise use of all God has given us.

We are stewards of the mercy of God. That was the topic for the first sermon of the series, preached on September 11. Because God has shown mercy to us, we must show mercy to each other. Because God's heart is inclined toward mercy, our hearts must be inclined toward mercy. This topic came first because it belongs first, because God's mercy makes us what we are and sets the tone for our whole way of being. God is love and we are true to our true identity as God's children when we show love.

We are stewards of the community of faith. That was the second topic -- Sunday, September 25. God has given us to each other, and we please God by taking good care of each other. This church family is God's gift to us, a gift to be valued and protected and enjoyed.

We are stewards of the Lord's table -- October 2. The communion table is the Lord's table, not ours. The bread and wine of communion, emblems of Jesus himself, are the gifts of the Lord Jesus to us, gifts we should receive eagerly and share freely.

The designated topic for this Sunday, October 16, is this: We are stewards of our treasure. We are stewards of our treasure, our wealth, our money, which means that we are called to make good and wise use of our wealth, to use our wealth to serve the purposes of the One from whom it came.

This was supposed to be a key week in the development of the stewardship theme, because, even though I have wanted to make it clear that stewardship has to do with so much more than what we do with our money, what we do with our money is a vital part of stewardship and is in fact what we usually mean when we talk about stewardship.

I will be honest with you. I chose stewardship as our fall worship theme because I believe this to be a critical time in the life of our church. The larger economic environment is making it harder and harder for us to increase the

giving that supports our church's ministry and mission, just when the possibilities for ministry and mission are multiplying, when our outreach is expanding, and the members of our staff are brimming over with new energy and enthusiasm and creativity and vision. This is not the time to dial back! We need some good teaching, some good preaching, some good cheerleading about faithful Christian stewardship!

Sara Lynch and her stewardship committee are going to do some of that, starting today, but I can't preach the sermon I intended to preach, a sermon about making good and wise and faithful use of our money, because that's not what the text says, that's not what Jesus says. I can't make him say what I want him to say. I have to listen, which is undoubtedly a better thing to do!

So let's do it, let's listen to Jesus together ...

The Pharisees went off and made a plan to trap Jesus.

That's where the story begins: Pharisees plotting against Jesus. We are nearing the end of the gospel, nearing the time when the leaders of the Jerusalem Temple will take direct action, when they will have Jesus arrested and tried and hauled before the Roman authorities, when they will successfully persuade the Romans to put him to death.

But for now the Pharisees are just trying to trap Jesus, to discredit him. He has made them increasingly jealous because of his popularity among the people, and increasingly angry because he has singled them out for criticism. Jesus has been telling stories that openly paint them in a bad light, declaring that the kingdom of God will be taken from them and given to others, given to those they would deem wholly unfit, but who, Jesus says, will prove to be better stewards of God's kingdom.

They feel jealous and angry and threatened, but they are afraid to take action against Jesus, because of the people, because the people like him so well. They proceed carefully, shrewdly, because they understand the political climate, or, to put it another way, because they are cowards!

So they try to trap Jesus. They look for a way to make him look bad in the eyes of the people. They decide to pose him a question: "Is it against our Law to pay taxes to the Roman Emperor, or not?"

It's a win/win situation! If Jesus says, "Yes, it is surely against our Law to bow to the authority of Rome by paying taxes," he will offend the members of Herod's party among them and give them grounds for bringing him before the Roman authorities on charges of treason.

But if Jesus says, "No, it is not against our Law," he will lose the people, lose their affection, lose their support, because the Roman tax is for them a bitter pill, a glaring reminder of their subservience and the continued absence of the God whose kingdom Jesus has told them is at hand. If Jesus will not stand up against Rome on their behalf, what hope can he offer them?

Either way, whatever answer Jesus gives to their question, they will win and Jesus will lose.

Teacher, we know that you tell the truth ...

That's how they come to him -- flattering him, setting him up! You tell the truth! You speak your mind! You aren't influenced by public opinion or scared off by the threats of powerful people. You say what God wants, regardless!

Hypocrites! What hypocrites!

They praise him for his boldness, while they are shaking in their boots! They flatter him for his honesty, while they bite their tongues and play politics.

They hate the Romans and their tax, but would never risk their standing or their lives by saying so in public. They ask Jesus to take a stand -- one way or the other -- that they are unwilling to take themselves. They ask him to address the issue of Roman taxation as a matter of law, as a matter of God's law, while they do only what is politically and personally expedient.

So Jesus calls them out. They are hypocrites. They are afraid of what the people think, afraid of what the Roman authorities think, silent and impotent in the face of human suffering, but they ask Jesus to speak.

Show me the coin ...

That's what Jesus answers: "Show me the coin for paying the tax."

And they do, they bring him a coin.

"Whose face and name are these?"

"The Emperor's."

"Well, then, pay to the Emperor what belongs to the Emperor, and pay to God what belongs to God."

Does Jesus answer the question? They asked him to address the issue of Roman taxation theologically, to declare God's will about paying tribute to a foreign empire, but Jesus takes God out of the question, or, more properly, Jesus entirely reframes the question. For Jesus, it's not a question of law, but a question of authority, and when it comes to authority, God has it all over Caesar!

The Pharisees were impressed by money and power, by the power of money and the power to take money. The Roman tax was for them an incendiary issue, a bitter pill, a nagging reminder of the impotence and indignity of their people, an obstacle in the way of their freedom, a massive obstacle in the way of their ability to freely be the people of God they were called to be.

But Jesus is not impressed by money or power.

Whose face and name are these? Well, then, pay to the Emperor what belongs to the Emperor.

And what belongs to the Emperor? This silly little piece of metal! To that he is entitled, but of the rest ...

Do you understand what Jesus has done? He has made a theological answer to their question, by making a molehill out of the mountain of Roman wealth and power. They tremble before the Emperor. They cower before his power. They resent his ability to take their money and their freedom, but what can he really take from them? Nothing that matters! Only this little piece of metal that he made! So give him what belongs to him if he wants it back, but give to God what belongs to God!

And what belongs to God?

Show me the coin ... Whose face and name are these?

Tell me. Where will you find God's name and face imprinted? On you! The image of God is imprinted on you, body and soul! You belong to God. Give God what belongs to God. What you owe God is ... yourself!

So, you see, my sermon had to be changed. The topic is "stewards of our treasure," but, as we will sing in a few minutes:

High King of heaven, my treasure thou art.

God is our treasure -- not wealth, not money. The image of God in us is our treasure, our riches, our gift. We are stewards of the image of God in us.

And this stewardship is much bigger -- so much bigger and deeper and of far-reaching effect -- than what we choose to do with a piece of metal or a scrap of paper.

So, by all means, take care of your obligations. Pay your taxes. Make a pledge to the church. Make a good pledge to the church! But don't think that is what God wants from you.

God doesn't want your money. God wants your life!