

Where Your Treasure Is

Luke 20:20-26

(Stewardship Sunday – November 11, 2007)

Hoping to entrap Jesus through something he said, so that the Romans would arrest him, the Pharisees put this question to him, “Teacher, we know that you are right in what you say and teach, and you show deference to no one, but teach the way of God in accordance with truth. Is it lawful for us to pay taxes to the emperor or not?”

Seeing through this attempt to entrap him, Jesus replied, “Show me a denarius. Whose head and whose title does it bear?” They said, “The emperors.” He said to them, “Then give to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s.” Thus, their attempt to catch failed. Taken aback by his answer, they had no reply.

Christians and the Christian church, have seemed to have a kind of love-hate relationship with money, sometimes calling money evil (or at least unimportant), but other times seeming to be obsessed with it. There are plenty of examples of religious threatenings, manipulations, and exploitations to browbeat people into giving. Then, more grotesque yet have been some of the blatantly lavish kinds of spending that have taken place in the name of religion. Those have ranged all the way from the countless, massive, ornate, gilded cathedrals of the past, constructed with money extruded from starving, impoverished populations, to the asinine religious theme parks and media empires of recent decades. It’s a confused picture.

Jesus’ teachings have not, moreover, been as helpful on the matter as one could wish. That incident in our scripture was one of the very few times in which Jesus is reported to have said anything at all about money. And even in this case, it was as much about a law enforcement issue as one about money. He did say, though, that since the stamp of Caesar – of the federal government – was on the currency, something was obviously owed there. And then he went on to say that since God’s stamp is on everything of life and creation, far, far more was owed to God. That was an interesting answer – quite clever too. But it stops way short of clarifying

for you and me, how we might best focus our generosity; that is, to what we should give, how much we should give, and on what rationale.

Unfortunately, that's left room for a lot of weird, even nauseating beliefs about giving. One longstanding one is that religious giving is a kind of personal fire insurance. Simply stated, it's the implied threat that if God doesn't get HIS, somewhere down the road YOU'LL GET YOURS, and you won't like it at all. As I see that, it's no more than raw, religious blackmail. A variant of that one has it that there is something magical or mystical about any and all sacrifice – specifically sacrificing one's money. The bigger and more painful the sacrifice, supposedly the more God is obligated to help you with whatever is threatening you or scaring you.

You might recall the old story of the man and woman whose pleasure boat's engine caught fire a few miles from the ocean shore. They had no chance to radio a distress call. They barely managed to get into the water before the boat exploded, leaving them only pieces of wreckage to cling to. Hours went by. They were cold, were in a state of advanced fatigue and were worried about sharks. In desperation, the husband began to pray, "Oh God," he said, "I know that my wife and I have not been very devout persons, that we've been a bit stingy and selfish. But God, if you'll just get us out of this mess, I promise that we will give you one-half of everything that we" But at this point his wife yelled, "STOP!" Don't you pray another word. I just heard the sound of a helicopter."

Do you see? As she saw it, this was going to be a straightforward purchase of divine services. And that idiotic kind of superstition remains a substantial part of religious thinking.

I remember my Dad telling of a friend of mine who began to attend the church my father served in the state of Washington. Not only did he attend, but he made substantial, regular contributions.

It turned out, though, that the reason for this sudden interest and generosity was that, either through his own misreading of the Bible, or more likely, from some odd-ball religious

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source, he had come to believe that if a person gave one-tenth of his net income to the church, that God had promised to annually, miraculously increase the person's gross income by ten percent. So he, for several months made these contributions of ten-percent of his calculated net income. He then gave god a reasonable amount of time to pay up, but it never happened. He vented his fury upon my Dad since he couldn't get at God. He never set foot in that church again (or probably any other). God's system was a fraud.

And, you are undoubtedly aware of other crass, exploitive religious gimmicks used to separate devout people from their money. I don't know whether the statistics still hold true, but in the late nineties a survey indicated that the largest group of contributors to the religious empires of Jerry Falwell, Pat Robertson, Garner Ted Armstrong (and others like them) were the most financially and emotionally vulnerable. The most poignant part was that the single largest source was fifteen and twenty dollar a week contributions mailed in by elderly widows living on fixed incomes, below the federal poverty line. Notwithstanding, though, all of the incomprehensible, embarrassing, sometimes neurotic things that swirl around religious giving, the fact remains that churches (this one included), only exist because of the generosity of the people who make them up. As nice as it would be, to be able to not have to think about anything but caring, serving, inspiring, teaching, and comforting, we too live in the all-too-real, not very heavenly world of budgets, of program expenses, of maintenance costs, of utilities, of postage, of staffing, of inflation, and everything that comes under the heading of fiscal management and responsibility. As someone quipped, "From the time that an infant first struggles to get her toes into her mouth, life is a continual struggle to make both ends meet."

We work hard here, at doing that right, responsibly, and without making it a constant harangue. Thanks to a steady stream, over the years, of excellent managers, the financial life of our church has been well handled — better, I am convinced than is typical of churches. I see newsletters from quite a few other churches, and I believe we do very well with our activities, staffing, and facilities. We can feel good about that!

As important as that is, being well managed isn't what we're about or what we are here for, is it? The real reasons that we invest ourselves, our time and our resources have to do with another whole dimension of our individual lives and our shared life. How we are valued and experienced differs some from person to person, which makes it complicated to talk about. Nevertheless, let me try to mention only a few examples of what I hope drives your appreciation and also your generosity when you reflect upon your church. An old "Peanuts" cartoon offers a tool of thought for reflecting upon one piece of it. In the first frame, Linus is saying to Charlie Brown, "I think I've learned the secret to life." He goes on, "I went to the doctor yesterday because I had a sore throat. The nurse put me in a certain room. I could hear a kid in another room screaming his head off. When the doctor came in to see me, I told him I was glad I wasn't the kid in that other room." "Yes," he said, "That kid will have to have his tonsils out. You're lucky. You only have a mild inflammation." Then in the last frame, Linus says philosophically, "The secret of life is to be in the right room." Medically, that was, of course, absurd. I like the image though, because in terms of one's faith and spiritual development, being in the "right" room, "finding the right human and spiritual context" is terribly important. This church, as I am certain you know, is not the "right room" for everyone. There are people who are bewildered if not appalled, for example, at this church's insistence that each and every person take full responsibility for unfolding his or her own religious convictions and relationship with God. There are plenty who are also incredulous about our inclusive, non-judgmental approach to membership (seeing ourselves as an open clinic for searching, struggling souls, NEVER a museum full of saints. Still others definitely have a problem with our openly declaring that while we take the Bible very seriously, we do not take it word-for-word literally. They are the same ones who are troubled by our assertion that God is still speaking and unfolding truth — that is, that the last word of God was NOT when the Bible took its final form. That really is okay, since there are plenty of churches around that will be the "right room" for them. For several hundred people, though, we seem

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to turn out to BE the “right room.” It’s difficult to generalize as to why. Typically, though, you are those who choose to manage your own growth, your own change, your own moral development and your own search for meaning. For many of you, it has to do with the fact that you aren’t impressed with the concept of religious authorities or intermediaries. It may have to do with your finding intellectual, spiritual and other human diversity quite stimulating rather than alarming. Whatever, though, has come together to make this the “right room” for each one, we as a church work hard at keeping in place, what we hope is a free, open, and adventuresome, intellectually challenging approach to faith and spirituality.

That leads to another piece of what makes this church a vital part of me and I hope of you too. It has to do with what I am and what you are becoming as a person. Unlike, for example, an automobile, there is no neutral gear in the matter of yours and my humanity. A person is either growing or she is deteriorating. At any given point, for example, I am either becoming more sensitive or I am hardening. I am becoming yet more excited and intrigued with life or am drifting into boredom and tedium.

The church (this church) casts its weight on the positive side of that and does all it can to encourage that to be true of you. It does so, in part, through the teaching, the preaching, the songs, the prayers, the working together, the shared laughter, the worrying together, the playing together and yet more. In a distracting, frenetic, depersonalized time and world like ours that is more important than is often understood. Our decision to worship here, to discover and be discovered by each other, to give and to work, to care and be cared about, has explicitly to do with keeping you and me human, with keeping our minds open (keeping them from congealing into a deadly hardheadedness), of furthering each of our awareness of ourselves as healer and comforter, of nourishing our generosity (not only toward the church but in myriad of ways unique to where God has placed us in life), of prying open complacency when it sneaks in upon us, of nourishing our appetite for, and enjoyment of people, of keeping

squarely in front of each of us, some vision of all that we yet can be, no matter where we are in life.

Do we always succeed in all of that? Of course not. But just your willingness and your choice to make the church a part of your life, is your saying an unshakeable “YES” to life, in the face of all that tempts us to cynicism, passivism, and narcissism.

The third piece of it is the most difficult to get at. So I’ll hang another image that might help.

A mother, wishing to support her eight-year-old son’s interest in the piano, took him to a concert-recital by the great pianist, Paderewski. During the intermission, the mother ran into a friend and in the ensuing conversation, didn’t notice that her son had slipped away. As the intermission was ending and the houselights began to fade and the piano was again spotlighted, there, to the mother’s horror, was her son up on stage, on the bench at the Steinway, picking out with one finger, “Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star.”

With a gasp, the mother started down the aisle to retrieve him. But she only half-way when Paderewski walked onto the stage toward the piano. He whispered to the boy, “Don’t quit. Keep playing. Just keep playing.” Then leaning over the boy, this master pianist began improvising both a part with his left hand, while his right arm reached around to the other side, encircling the boy and adding a running obligato with his right hand. So, the naked melody that the boy was picking out, one note at a time was surrounded with soaring, beautiful, music. What the boy and the master thus created was unforgettable to all who experienced it that evening.

Something analogous to that is the other image I’ll leave you with, of what we are hoping and doing in the totality of our giving and working and caring together as the unique community that this church is.

“Larger-than-life” experiences are difficult to describe, whether in something like that incident in the concert hall, or as a fact of the life of this congregation.

But it is my belief and my observation that God does that kind of thing with us and among us; takes a hand (or two hands, like Paderewski, if you prefer) and picks up on the naked melody of yours and my caring, giving, searching, hoping (even including the wrong notes), and then composes something that is not only marvelous, but is of eternal importance through the unique melody that each of us bring here. THAT, though it is nothing that I can prove, control, or pin down, nonetheless makes this worth it all.

Whatever, then, that has moved you to come here, whether it's to explore your faith, renew your hope, enlarge your spirit, find forgiveness, express your gratitude, or any number of other intangible, difficult-to-describe dimensions of what happens, we unashamedly ask you to help us with it: to commit some of your resources to the other, very down-to-earth part, to the underlying mechanism that makes it possible. Do it for God's sake, for the sake of each other, and (one would hope) for your own sake. For as Jesus mentioned in the Sermon on the Mount, "Where your treasure is, there shall your heart be also."