

Scripture Lesson: Mark 12:13-17

Pew Bible N.T. pg. 46

¹³ Then they sent to him some Pharisees and some Herodians to trap him in what he said. ¹⁴ And they came and said to him, "Teacher, we know that you are sincere and show deference to no one, for you do not regard people with partiality but teach the way of God in accordance with truth. Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar or not? ¹⁵ Should we pay them, or should we not?" But knowing their hypocrisy, he said to them, "Why are you putting me to the test? Bring me a denarius and let me see it." ¹⁶ And they brought one. Then he said to them, "Whose head is this and whose title?" They answered, "Caesar's." ¹⁷ Jesus said to them, "Give to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's." And they were utterly amazed at him.

Mark 12:13-17

10/13/2024 – Saginaw First U.M.C.

"First Fruits"

Pastor Amy Terhune

Last month, I was honored to be invited to attend the elevation service for Bishop Hurley J. Coleman at the World Outreach Campus, who was elected a bishop in the Church of God in Christ last November. I've gotten to know Bishop Coleman through our work in the Ezekiel Project and he's become a respected colleague and friend, so it really was an honor to be invited to attend this service.

In the United Methodist Church, when someone is being ordained or elevated to Bishop, we wear red. I don't know if you knew that or not, but just like on Pentecost, we put on red to represent the movement of the Holy Spirit. Red stoles, red shoes, red ties – if you ever get to go to Annual Conference for the ordination service, wear red. It's a thing. I thought it was universal thing. So when I got dressed to go to this elevation service, I did what a good United Methodist would do. I put on my red clergy shirt and my black suit, and I headed over there. In the Church of God in Christ, only bishops wear red. Woopsie! I got asked several times that night: are you a bishop. No, I'm just a methodist.

But in spite of that faux pas, which I've been assured is not a big deal, I was seated right up in the front row with a bunch of other visiting clergy. I was treated with grace and dignity and kindness. It was a three hour service, but wow!!! Fantastic music, incredible preaching, electrifying prayer. I was blessed that night.

Then came time for the offering. They passed a basket around the front among the leadership sitting up on the platform. Then they gathered that offering together in a bundle, and they began to announce, name by name, who had given how much. I probably looked like a deer in the headlights, because never, in all my life, have I ever heard an offering announced so publicly in that manner. Now a cynic might say, "Oh, it's a prestige thing – they're trying to show off how generous they are". But I was there, and I'm telling you the truth: that's not what it was at all. That wasn't the atmosphere or the feeling. It was an accountability measure. It was a way of demonstrating that the leadership of the church supports the new bishop and his new initiatives for ministry. And the people responded generously to their leadership.

In the 26th chapter of the Book of Deuteronomy, the nation of Israel was instructed by God to bring an offering in late summer. When you begin to harvest – when you pick the first fruits from the vines and the trees, when you bring in the first crops from the field, when you gather the first eggs from the chicks that have grown into hens, when you get ready to butcher that first fatted cow – whatever it may be – before you store up any of it in your barn or your bank account, you bring a portion of it to God. It was called a first fruits offering. And when they brought that very first produce,

they were to remember their history. Your forefather was a wandering Aramean. Your people became slaves – lawless, hopeless, broken. But God heard their cries and God responded. God delivered them from captivity. God gave them land and law, and you are beneficiary of those incredible gifts. So give, said Deuteronomy. Give gratefully in recognition of God’s gifts. Give knowing you’ll help those less fortunate – the widow, the orphan, and the foreigner in your land. Give freely, trusting that all you need will follow by God’s grace. Give to what God is going to do.

There’s a tendency to want to give God what’s left over. After all the bills are paid, and all the expenses met, after we’re sure there’s enough, then we’ll give something to God. But that’s not what scripture says. Scripture says put God first, and everything else will fall into place. When my dad died, I inherited his financial advisor. I’d never had a financial advisor before. To be honest, I never thought I needed one. But he sat down with us after dad’s affairs had all been dealt with and asked about our priorities. And so we told him, we want to be tithers. We want to be able to give 10% to the church. And do you know what he said? He said: let’s see what we can do to make that happen. And when shock registered in my expression, he reminded me that he works for me. My priorities are his priorities. That was revolutionary for me.

To give to God off the top reflects a commitment. For me, it’s about my identity as a follower of Jesus and my priorities as one of his disciples.

When Jesus entered the temple to worship on that day 2000 years ago, he didn’t come with bills or investments or a financial advisor. They had coins of different weights – gold, silver, bronze. But they weren’t really all that different from coins today. There’s a head on one side and a sun or a warrior or a goddess or an animal or something like that on the other side. The inscription on Roman coins reads, “Tiberius Caesar, Son of the Divine Augustus, Pontifex Maximus.” The coin basically says Caesar is our God, so in Caesar we trust. Of course, such a coin would have been considered very offensive to the loyal Jew—a clear violation of the first commandment to have no other gods. So offensive, in fact, that they would never have used it to make an offering to God. After all, it also bears the graven image of another god—that’s TWO out of ten commandments broken right there. But since Rome was the occupying power, one had to use their coinage in the outside world. When one came to the temple, one would trade Roman coins for Shekels—traditional Jewish money—but to do so, one would also have to pay an exchange rate or fee. So in effect, the temple authorities could piously denounce this Roman outrage on the one hand, and get rich off trading on it on the other hand.

That’s some background on what’s happening as our scene opens. At this juncture, Jesus is well into his ministry. People have seen the miracles God works through him. They’ve seen the healings, the hope, the promises. But so has the leadership. This Jesus is unpredictable and uncontrollable. At times, he seems to say the right things, but at other times, he’s a threat to everything those in power don’t want to change. Jesus is too popular. He’s rocking too many boats. He’s becoming a real problem and not just a minor annoyance. He’s turning over tables, he’s telling difficult parables, and so the lesson tells us that the Pharisees and the Herodians get together and think up some questions to try to stump him and trip him up.

First off, that’s an odd partnership. The Pharisees and the Herodians don’t normally like each other. The Herodians are those loyal to Herod, Rome’s puppet-king. They’re the power-players, the ones invested in the status quo. The Pharisees represent most of the population. They’re devout, and have an expansive following. This may be a case of “the enemy of my enemy is my friend”. Or it may simply have been a matter of expediency, but however it happened, they got together.

“What do you think, Jesus? Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor or not? This must have seemed like the perfect ploy. Would Jesus play to the gallery and encourage disobedience to Rome? Such boldness would have won him followers but at the expense of pitting himself against the Roman

government. If, on the other hand, he sided with Rome, he would alienate the common people who despised the outsiders who had conquered them, who collected taxes to support an outside occupation of God's promised land. [adapted from "God and the IRS" by King Duncan, www.Sermons.com.]

But Jesus is rather ingenious here. He doesn't play into the politics. Instead, he makes them actually look at that coin, examine it, take in details. Then he redefines it's significance from a symbol of oppression to merely the property of another. It's got Caesar's picture on it, so I guess it's his. Let him have it. But remember: you must give to God the things that are God's. Jesus doesn't get distracted from the truth – the heart of the matter. He's not going to play their games. Time is short. He constantly draws our attention back to who we are as followers of Yahweh.

Give to God the things that are God's. Which is everything. Our homes, our jobs, our stuff, our loved ones, our skills and abilities, our time, our bodies, our world, our lives—everything belongs to God. I say that over and over again because it bears repeating. The world constantly tells us that we earn what we've got. Not so.

But you should know that this lesson isn't really about stuff. This is about identity and commitment. During my last year of seminary, I had the opportunity to go on pilgrimage through Great Britain. We started way up north in Scotland, traveling from Glasgow to Oban and then taking the ferry out to a little Island called Iona. We arrived in the dark, in storm, and dragged our luggage through the rain the bishops cottage where we were to stay. Iona is 3 miles long and 1.5 miles wide, surrounded by the wild Atlantic on all side. The Island rugged and windy and home to more sheep than people. It was there, in the late 500s, that Saint Columba landed with 3 or 4 others from Ireland intent on winning the rustic native Scots to Christ. To ensure the mission, Columba burned the boat when they landed. They had no choice but to succeed or die. I often remember that story. At some point, you strike out where God is calling you, and there's no going back. You have to go forward. Or die.

I read once about how a missionary society wrote to David Livingstone and asked, "Have you found a good road to where you are? If so, we want to know how to send other evangelists to join you." Livingstone wrote back, "If you have folks who will come only if they know there is a good road, I don't want them. I want those who will come even if there is no road at all." [from *Good News Broadcaster*, April, 1985, p. 12.]

There isn't always a road. The path isn't always clear. The church is looking at a future that isn't like the past. What we were 50 years ago won't work anymore. What we will be is still being revealed. But I trust the one who calls me to the road. Jesus burned plenty of boats. He traveled a road he couldn't return. A road that led to a cross, yes, and then on to resurrection and new life. If ever there was a sign of God's commitment to us—God's willingness to give us everything—it would be the cross. Is it more than a trinket around our neck? Is the empty tomb more than a once-upon-a-time? Of course they are. They're the blueprint for faith.

There's an old cliché that still rings true that goes like this: If we were accused of being a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict us? Give to God what is God's. Give everything. Total commitment.

Let me say one more thing about that. I've prayed for years that the church would be a place more open to all kinds of people – the poor, the disenfranchised, the persecuted. And I know that matters to you too. Because you've joined me in that prayer. We've welcomed the LGBTQIA+ community. We're feeding school kids. It matters. I have prayed for kids, and you have too. Today, there are 31 kids, youth and adults headed to Leaman's. Kid's club has jumped from 3 to 8, which doesn't sound like much, but that's like nearly a 300% increase. In the past 2 months, we've had at least 10 young people in their 20s here, so a letter is going out this week to invite them to come to and have dinner and get to know each other. Because in a world increasingly impersonal and isolated, we

can be a place where people can connect. That's ministry. In a couple of weeks, we're going to fling pumpkins with a catapult. Why? Because it's a fun, no-pressure way to bring community together, and we all need community. No one comes to God by being wacked over the head with judgement. We bring people to faith by building a loving community where people are free to wrestle with doubts and where we can face together the challenges of making a difference in our world.

This is where the preacher usually stops. Total commitment. A word of hope. That's what this passage is about. Yes, it is. But friends, in and among the malice and the jealousy, Jesus also offers a word of grace here to those who would hear it. Give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's. Part of giving to God what is His means giving what's hard to let go of. We have agreed that everything comes from God—our homes, our jobs, our stuff, our loved ones, our skills and abilities, our time, our bodies, our world, our lives. And every one of those things must be given back to God. But hear this:

We're called not only to turn over not our homes, but our secret closets in the heart where we hide our sinful selves.

We're called to turn over not only our jobs, but our bills and our obligations.

We're called to turn over to Him not only our stuff, but our burdens and trials.

We're called to turn over to Him not only our loved ones, but our enemies and our grief.

We're called to turn over not only our time, but our fear.

We called not only to turn over to Him our skills and abilities, but our weaknesses and our failures.

We're called not only to turn over to Him our bodies, but our limitations and illnesses.

We're called to turn over to Him not only our world, but our problems and our crises.

We're called to turn over to Him not only our lives, but our broken dreams and lost opportunities.

When we give our whole selves, we must give our warts and all, for only God can purge the sin and heal the pain. Give to God what is God's. Total Commitment. Total surrender. Do not hold on to what will drown your spirit when God has said, 'give it to me and I'll take care of it.' The truth is that God cannot make God's dream for our world a reality until we give up to God all that holds us back.

"I want to end this morning with a story Leonard Sweet tells about a husband and wife who were preparing to go to a memorial service for the son of friends of theirs. The young man had been killed in Afghanistan. His family was dedicating a window in their church to this young man who had lost his life. The window cost \$50,000.

"In their discussion of how wonderful it was for this family to give this money to the church so that their son could have a window in his memory, suddenly the wife turned to her husband and asked: "What are we going to give?"

"We don't need to give anything," he replied. "Our son came back alive and safe."

"That's what I mean," she said. "They lost their son and they're giving \$50,000. We got our son back, and we're not giving anything? What are we going to give?" [4 ¶s from "Trip Questions" by Leonard Sweet, www.Sermons.com.]

Friends, life costs something. A future costs something. Jesus died for us, but we are called to live for Him. Jesus gave his very best, off the top, the first fruits of God's grace and love, to save this world. And we here at First UMC are bearing fruit – First Fruits. But that costs something. I won't read out your names or the amounts individually. But I look forward to sharing next week the total that our leadership is pledging. And I look forward to the ways we'll step out in faith in the next few weeks to fund the fruit beginning to ripen here at First UMC. And I am so excited to see what God will do in the coming few years as we are faithful to rise to the challenges before us. Amen and Amen.