

November 5, 2017

“Stewardship”

John Wesley United Methodist Church

Matthew 22:15-22

Rev. Rebecca Mincieli, 508-548-3050

You know, many people ask the question, “Is the Bible really relevant in today’s world?” Well, all we have to do is direct them to the scripture we just heard about money. Because Jesus’ enemies come to him, and although they have an ulterior motive, they ask him the same question I’m sure we often want to ask, “Do we have to pay taxes?” But Jesus knew they were testing him, and he asks them for a coin from the realm, and says, “Whose image and title are stamped on it?” “Caesar’s,” comes their reply. “Well, then,” says Jesus, “give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar, and give to God what belongs to God.” Now this is more than just a great answer by Jesus. You see, the coin was stamped with Caesar’s image and Jesus said give that back to Caesar. But now think about this – we are stamped with God’s image, imprinted with God’s likeness. And so, Jesus is saying, you and I belong to God. And how wonderful is that! But it also means we must give ourselves and what we are and what we have back to God who created us and who gave us all we have, in the first place. This is the basic tenant of stewardship, and that is what I want to talk about today.

You know, typically right after I leave John Wesley on Sunday's, I start thinking about the next week's worship service and sermon, and I'm constantly looking for ideas and illustrations to use. And I knew this week's sermon would be a difficult one because it's on stewardship, everyone’s favorite subject, so it had to be relevant! Well last week John and I went home, had some lunch and started watching the Patriots, which was a good game! But I noticed one particular commercial kept running a number of times. It was the Verizon commercial that touted the new iPhone and their network. "Best phone, best network" was the tagline. Then, later that afternoon, at our "Trunk or Treat" party, we used a cell phone to play spooky Halloween music. And since bad weather was predicted, a number of us were on our cell phones looking at the weather radar in order to determine almost to the minute when the storm would arrive. Thanks be to God - 400 people stayed dry because the party ended at 6:30 pm, precisely when the rain began to fall. And finally, in the aftermath of the storm last week, thousands of people across New England were left without power, but the authorities, realizing how important our cell phones are to our lives, announced that certain government buildings and libraries would be open so people could come in and charge their phones. So I got an idea (holding up cell phone), thinking about how critical this little device is, and I thought about the person who effectively started it all, and decided to let him give my stewardship sermon.

You see, one of the most iconic companies that exists today is Apple. Its founder was Steven Jobs. I'm sure you've heard of him. There was even a movie about his life that was made a couple of years ago. Anyway, the cell phone, be it an iPhone or Android, with its built in camera, touch screen, and micro processor able to handle all those apps, was basically developed by Apple. Jobs was diagnosed with cancer in 2003 and died in 2011. According to his sister, and reported to the New York Times, his last words on his death bed were, "Oh wow... oh wow!" Now for me, as a Christian who definitely believes there is something wonderful that awaits us after death, the thought of what Jobs might have been seeing or describing on the other side of this earthly life, sends chills up and down my spine. Because I can imagine echoing those very words upon seeing my first glimpse of heaven. "Oh wow, oh wow!" Because St. Paul said, "No eye has seen, no ear has heard, and no mind has imagined what God has prepared for those who love him." Yes, the "WOW" factor of heaven is going to be big. Really big!

Now some of you might find it strange that I am using Steven Jobs, a convert to Buddhism, for this sermon today on stewardship. He was far from perfect based on what I've researched, but based also on some of the things Jobs did in his life, I'd like to think of him in the same context as some of the different and perhaps difficult people Jesus described in his stories. Perhaps like the different Good Samaritan, a man of another religion than Jesus, but who showed his neighbor compassion and Jesus commended him for that virtue. Or, like the different and difficult foreign woman who wanted her daughter healed, and because of her tenacity and faith, Jesus praised her and cured her daughter. Or like the difficult prodigal son, who finally comes home. Regretfully, Jobs said he spurned Christianity because, "Its followers didn't live like Jesus or see the world like Jesus." Unfortunately, that's often true, and it should make you and I think about how people perceive us as Christians. But it is remarkable, don't you think, that no matter what other faith one may practice, or even if one doesn't believe in any faith, most people seem to know and recognize the character and inherent goodness of Jesus Christ. And those same people use Christ as the standard by which we all should be measured. That alone speaks volumes about our Lord and Savior, doesn't it?

But here's the lesson from Jobs that I want to tell you about. A couple of years after his cancer diagnosis, he was asked to give the commencement address at Stanford University. He spoke to a graduating class of young, energetic and idealistic men and women about to embark into their future, with visions of great success and material gains they would soon realize. And he probably gave them the best advice they'll ever receive, and probably preached the most relevant two sentence sermon

they'd ever heard, given the fact that most young people don't go to church. He said, "Remembering that I'll be dead soon is the most important motive I've ever have to help me make the big choices in life. Remembering that you're going to die is the best way I know to avoid the trap of thinking you have something to lose." Those are pretty profound words from a man whom the whole secular world admires and is considered to be successful, creative, powerful, and had everything he needed or wanted. "Remembering that I'll be dead soon is the most important motive I've ever have to help me make the big choices in life. Remembering that you're going to die is the best way I know to avoid the trap of thinking you have something to lose." And then he went on to tell them to put their lives into its proper perspective. To remember what is important. As he faced death he knew the truth that we came into this world with nothing and we will leave this world with nothing. This proves we have nothing to lose. The only thing we will face our Creator with will be our account of what we did with what we had.

And today, I'd like you to consider your financial pledge for 2018. And ask yourself, "what will I do with the money I have?" Jesus said, "Give to God what belongs to God." And we all know that everything we have comes from God. So, as you think about your financial situation, as you reflect on your account of your life, as you consider all that God has given you, will you return to God what belongs to God, for His work here on earth? When it comes to giving, we all know that we give to those to whom we trust and love the most. Now I know for some of you, things are very difficult, and you have to make a decision between buying groceries and paying the bills, or giving to the church. So for those who are struggling, I want to remind you again of the poor widow who put only two small coins worth a penny in the offering plate. And Jesus praised her more than any of the rest because she gave all she could and she gave out of love for God. And for the many of us here that have much, I want to remind you that Jesus said, "When someone has been given much, much will be required in return; and when someone has been entrusted with much, even more will be required."

I want to close with a story the old rabbis told about a wise man who, when he heard that the end of the world was near, still went out into his garden and he planted a tree.¹ You see, that was a countercultural sign of faith, of hope, of love and trust in God, even when the rest of the world couldn't see it or understand it. And we need to do the same. Because when the offering plate is passed, we too are asked to do something countercultural. We are asked to give our money away, we are asked to give to something beyond ourselves, even when the rest of the world can't see or understand. By giving, we are showing our faith and hope and trust in the work and purpose of God's church here at John Wesley.

¹ Time, Talent, Treasure: Peter Gomes

Showing that we want to reach out and make an impact in this world. That we want to support our young people and our children and grandchildren, by giving them a strong spiritual foundation, so they will be better able to face whatever the future might bring them. That as Christ's disciples in the world today we can and do and will change lives.

And the truth is, we're not losing a thing by giving our money away. Instead, we're gaining everything!

Amen