

BIBLE READING: Matthew 22:15-22

SERMON

One thing my wife was - was thoughtful and prayerful in how she used her money.

When it came to by groceries she had several criteria - two of which I remember well.

1. Fair Trade Coffee, tea and chocolate. she would go out of her way to find and buy FairTrade!
2. Poker machines! Woolworths is the major owner of poker machines in Australia, so she would not shop at Woolworths!.

There were several other criteria but those two stick out in my memory. How we use our money is at the heart of our reading today.

Americans have gone so far as to put "In God We Trust" on their currency. Mark Twain said "it always sounds well -- In God We Trust. I don't believe it would sound any better if it were true." He said the slogan would be more truthful if it designated the paper it was written on as 'the god we trust in'.

Money and politics and theology get pretty mixed up no matter when or where. That's what drives the story forward about Jesus in our gospel reading.

Some Herodians and some Pharisees try to trap Jesus with this question about money. The Herodians and the Pharisees are political opponents. The Herodians support the reign of the Herod family, which ruled Israel for the Roman Emperor. To support Herod was to support Rome and the tax. The Pharisees are the evangelical religious leaders of their day. They are committed to the idea that every person could faithfully observe the traditional religious practices that were part of the covenant with God. This intense religious practice enhanced Jewish cultural identity and was in its own way, a form of resistance to Rome. The Herodians and the Pharisees did not agree on almost anything, but apparently they did agree that Jesus was a threat. So they ask him "Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar or not?"

Jesus responds by asking them for a coin. What does a coin tell them about who they are? Having to pay the tax to Rome is a painful reminder that they are occupied by a foreign power who worshipped false gods. The tax could only be paid with Roman coins, which are also pieces of propaganda. Most of the coins contain an image of the emperor proclaiming him to be divine.

The silver denarius represents a day's wages for a laborer. One side of the coin proclaims the Emperor as a "son of the divine Augustus," while the other side honours him as the "Pontifex Maximus" or "chief priest" of Roman religion. The two sides of the coin confer absolute religious and civil authority on the Emperor.

The Herodians and the Pharisees didn't care what Jesus really thought about paying the tax. If he says "Yes, it is lawful," he will be seen as a traitor to his people, and lose the respect of many of his followers. If he says, "No, it is not lawful" he will give the Romans reason to arrest him. They thought they had him right where they wanted him - either answer would work to their advantage.

Only Jesus does not say "yes" or "no". His answer might be his best known sound bite, "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's." The coin bears Caesar's image – therefore it is Caesar's, so give it to him. But then what belongs to God? The answer must be whatever bears God's image. Genesis affirms that humans are made in the image of God – therefore human beings belong to God. Jesus' response challenged his

questioners about where their deepest allegiance lay. Jesus' answer is a soundbite for the ages because it recognizes the moral ambiguity that permeates human existence.

In the first century context, this particular tax was a tribute paid to support the occupation of Israel. The Jewish people had to financially support their own oppression. It's a moral question about what to do with money. Jesus' answer is a clue that financial decisions are always moral decisions.

In our context, as consumers we make choices about where and what to buy, how much to spend, how much to save. We can make the effort to purchase clothes and shoes not produced in sweatshops, but it does require effort. We can choose to pay more for products that are manufactured and packaged in ways that care for the earth and natural resources. If we have financial investments, rendering to God involves knowing the practices of the corporations that our money supports.

The more we think about this, the more we recognize that everything belongs to God. If we take seriously the idea of giving to God that which belongs to God, we are required to reckon with how all-encompassing that category is.

Politics, money and religion are all jumbled together in this teaching of Jesus. Politics, money and religion are all things many of us have been taught not to talk about, although I think it is more socially acceptable now to talk about politics and religion than about money.

We do tend to talk about money with our families. Or to be more accurate, we tend to learn about money within our families, but sometimes what we're taught is not to talk about it. That is one of many messages we might absorb.

Messages like:

Money doesn't grow on trees.

Always save for a rainy day.

A fool and his money are soon parted.

There's no such thing as a free lunch.

You can never be too rich. More is always better.

How much money you make determines your self-worth.

If you have money, God has blessed you.

If you don't have enough money, you've sinned or you don't have enough faith.

Many of these messages might be offered from a place of love and concern. They are intended as guidelines for living well, but they have a shadow side. Sometimes we internalise good messages in ways that only the shadow side is evident. For example, "there's no such thing as a free lunch" can easily establish itself as inherent distrust of other people's generosity. Or "always save for a rainy day" might create such fear that the other shoe is about to drop that we would hoard our money and refuse to spend it in ways that might actually create joy in our own lives or for other people.

Jesus said that the greatest commandment is to love God with all our heart and soul and mind. We are to be all in, loving God with everything we've got. Loving God with heart, soul

and mind means examining the money messages we live by, even critiquing the money messages that came from those we love. It means reckoning with the morality of our financial decisions. It means rejecting practices that don't enhance our love of God or neighbour and embracing those that do.

All that we are and all that we have and all that we hope to be belongs to God. We have been imprinted with the image of God. The ways we spend our money, our time, our resources, our life energy, all impact the ways we bear that image. So this week, may we bear the image and share the joy. Laugh. Dance. Love. Help. Breathe the sweet air of Spring and wonder at the beauty around us. Critically examine one money message you live by. Spend money to bring joy. Make a child giggle. Have a long talk with someone – really listen to them and enjoy their company. Give money to ease someone's pain. Keep giving to God all that is God's. Amen.

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