

Sermon for October 18, 2020

“God’s Economy, Part One: What’s God’s?”

Twenty-ninth Sunday in OT, Year A—Texts: Jeremiah 29:11; Matthew 22:15-22

The first Sunday of the Stewardship season seems like as good a time as any to begin talking about God’s economy. This morning—in particular—spiritual poverty.

On the subject—the late Brennan Manning once wrote, “The deeper we grow in the Spirit of Jesus Christ, the poorer we become, the more we realize that everything in life is a gift. The tenor of our lives becomes one of humble and joyful thanksgiving.”

It seems to me that a sure sign of spiritual poverty would be to think purely in terms of black and white; to reduce something—or someone—to right or wrong, true or false, proper or improper. At best—it betrays a lack of understanding and an under-appreciation of God’s world. To look at someone and without qualification declare that they’re either good or bad, sinner or saint is—at best—judgmental, because there’s usually more than meets the eye.

In light of all this, I’d venture to say that while it’s easy to rush to judge them, one can definitely say—spiritually-speaking—that the Pharisees were very poor indeed. Jesus confounded their thinking in many ways. There was much that Jesus taught about God’s Kingdom that they could agree with—things like: God will judge and condemn evil-doers. Yet—Jesus hung out with those that they considered sinners on a regular basis: prostitutes, tax collectors, adulterers—people like that; people the Pharisees thought that God wanted nothing to do with. They simply didn’t get it. Jesus taught that obedience to God and the Law was necessary, yet he healed on the Sabbath. Jesus bothered them.

And it was largely because while teaching about holiness—a concept integral to the Jewish faith—he condemned those who were considered—at the time—as the most holy people themselves—along with the scribes and the temple priests. Jesus disturbed the Pharisees and other religious leaders. He upset the world their beliefs created.

So—having decided that Jesus was dangerous, they decide to trap Jesus with his own words. They did this so that either, 1) the people would reject him or 2) the Romans would arrest him. What’s interesting is that they don’t go to Jesus themselves, they send their proxies to Jesus instead. They send their disciples and Herodians, that is—those loyal to King Herod and thus to Rome. They questioned him about the Roman poll tax which everyone had to pay. They thought their question was really clever and—in truth—it was. It was a “darned if you do, darned if you don’t” kind of question. There was no question that they were out to get Jesus.

But Jesus—as always—was one step ahead of them. “You hypocrites!” he says, “why are trying to trap me? Show me the coin that is used for paying the tax.” One of the Pharisees just happened to be carrying one. Jesus asks, “Whose image and inscription is on the coin?” They reply, “Caesar’s.” Jesus famously answers them, “So give to Caesar what is Caesar’s and to God what is God’s!”

But why call them hypocrites?

Well—hypocrisy is defined as claiming a virtue that one doesn't have. It comes the Greek meaning, to “play a part” or “act on the stage.” The Pharisees and proxies were playing the part of holy and recite their lines perfectly. But their question that begins, “Is it lawful...?” Well, it's not a question about **Roman** law—it's a question about **God's** Law. Is it lawful—according to the Bible—for a faithful, observant Jew—like a Pharisee—to pay Roman taxes?

A quick reading would say no. There's nothing specifically prohibiting Jews from paying Roman taxes. Ah, but therein lies the trap! Jesus asks for the coin, knowing full well a specific coin is required—a Roman coin—a denarius. It's a coin bearing the emperor's image and the inscription, “Tiberius, Emperor, son of God.”

So the coin violates the first two commandments. The one about having no other Gods except God and the one prohibiting any images of God. Possessing such a coin was extremely problematic for faithful, observant Jews—why? Not having it meant running afoul of the Romans, while having it was a violation of core Torah law.

So when the Pharisees produce a coin, it demonstrates their hypocrisy. Carrying around an image of a pagan god in their pocket, makes them guilty of idolatry! How could an observant Jew—and a Jewish leader at that—possibly have such a coin on their person? Why would they? And by calling them hypocrites, Jesus proves that they don't fully comprehend either God or God's laws. They know it in their heads—but not their hearts.

Here's my question: Is our faith only a matter of the head, the part of us that analyzes, categorizes and judges things? Or is it a matter of your whole being—your heart, soul and spirit; something to be experienced, something to be lived with all that is in us?

Are we a people who believe in a living God—a God who's not only relevant, but constantly present and active in the lives of his people in incredible ways? The Pharisees and their proxies are hypocrites, but not just because they try to trap Jesus. They're hypocrites because they refuse to go beyond what they already think they know of God. They could not even entertain the possibility that Jesus was the Messiah. It's that kind of black and white thinking—that judgmental thinking—that lead me to say at the outset, that spiritually speaking, these Pharisees were very poor indeed.

I've always believed that faith—spirituality—whatever you want to call it, has to be constantly growing, constantly maturing. I'm not talking about knowing more about the Bible—though that couldn't hurt. I mean that faith/spirituality must become more a part of who we are; more fully integrated into our lives—our ways of thinking and doing.

If our goal is righteousness—and Jesus says it should be—it involves our holiness being more than a façade. It involves a kind of integrity between what we believe and how we live out our beliefs. And here's where we begin drifting into deeper waters...

If we cannot—or will not—move beyond our own understanding of God—don't we risk placing God in a box? Effectively limiting God? Aren't we over-estimating ourselves?

Don't we risk over-confidence and the danger of calling God's actions into question—but never our own? Don't we miss experiencing God's fullness? Missing out on the abundant life God intends for us—playing a spiritual role, instead of living a spiritual life?

The Pharisees and the rest of the religious leaders could not—would not—conceive of what was possible with God. They could not see what God was doing in the man standing right in front of them. The Messiah? This guy? No way!

So many want to bring God down to their level, thereby making him easier to understand.

Take scripture, for example. We proof text, that is we take a passage from scripture—usually out of context—to make a point or strengthen an argument. In today's reading—we take Jesus' reply to the question about the poll tax and try to figure out what's Caesar's and what's God's—when the truth is that everything is God's. But as I hope I've shown—and not just today—there's much more to it than that. Formulaic thinking—with the easy answers that follow is the very thing that blinded the Pharisees to the reality of Jesus. What's more, it makes their division between God and Caesar a false one.

So—this isn't an argument about the separation of church and state. Even if it were—it'd make for a bad stewardship sermon. But—as I've said—all my sermons are stewardship sermons. No, what this is about—what **stewardship** is all about—is an invitation to a new kind of life. A life that is both abundant and eternal. And this is why all my sermons—well, most of them anyway—are stewardship sermons.

It's not about what we owe God because—let's face it—we've nothing God needs. But neither is it about what God wants from us. It's about what God wants for us—life abundant and eternal. So—it's about how we respond to God. Because stewardship—and here, brothers and sisters is the thing—is all about the way in which we live; which is to say it's a way of living that place God first. A life that places God squarely at the center. A life that ought to compel us to think and act differently.

Stewardship means considering our faith; what it is we believe and why we believe it.

Stewardship means taking our faith seriously enough to take a serious look—with a critical eye—at the extent of our spiritual short-comings and the degree to which our faith is—or isn't—an integral and vital part of our daily living and not just something we do on Sunday.

Stewardship means making time/space each day for God: for things like prayer, bible study and so forth, that enable us to experience God's presence, as we will and work for his good pleasure.

Stewardship means spending time in discernment, allowing time to be able to listen and sort through what God's will for our lives might be and how he might be calling us—regardless of who we are and where we might be in our lives.

Stewardship means imagining ourselves as partners in Christ's on-going work in the world.

Stewardship means living daily with a spirit and posture of praise and thanksgiving.

Stewardship means responding with grateful hearts to the ways in which God has richly blessed us.

Stewardship means realizing that God continuously calls us to grow and learn; to recognize where and when we can love more; to look for opportunities to serve more and

yes—even give more. In terms of time and talent—certainly—but also in terms of treasure.

Stewardship means recognizing God’s plans for our future plans for our welfare and not harm, a future with hope—as Jeremiah puts it—and trusting God enough to make an investment in that future.

In God’s economy, all is gift. All is grace. All is God’s. All is freely given by God. How we respond is up to us. Are we up to the task? Are we ready? I pray that we are because we have some work ahead of us and the future is here—now.

Thanks be to God.

Amen and amen.