

Lectionary 29 + October 22, 2017***Generosity Sunday***

Jesus is very clever. When someone asks Jesus a question he will often respond, not with a direct answer but with another question. This is what Rabbis did and what they do. Answer a question with another question.

Jesus is clever in yet another way. Sometimes the questions posed are only a ploy meant to trap Jesus. Yet, Jesus successfully avoids the trap. The Pharisees and the Herodians ask Jesus a question. What these two groups have in common is a dedication to seeing that the Jewish people be independent from the Roman Empire.

Here's their question – "Is it lawful to pay taxes to the Emperor?"

Here's the trap –If Jesus answers "yes," he will betray the people with whom he has been very popular. Colluding with the Empire would contradict all of his preaching about the Kingdom of God. If Jesus answers "no," he will most surely get in trouble with the Roman authorities.

Jesus answers neither "yes" nor "no." First, he says "show me the coin." Then comes the question: "Whose image do you see on the coin?" The coin bears the image of the Emperor Caesar. "Well, then, give to the emperor what belongs to the emperor, give to God what belongs to God."

Jesus is very clever indeed.

Jesus does more than avoid a trap. He exposes the hypocrisy of the Herodians and Pharisees, the folks who ask him the question. These religious leaders, having this very conversation with Jesus in the Temple (the place of worship), have in their pockets coins bearing the image of the Emperor. That's a graven image. Their guilt is revealed. They are carrying the image of a false god.

Jesus says "give those dirty coins back to the Emperor." More importantly, "Give to God the things that are God's."

And what belongs to God? Everything. For it is God, not the Emperor, who rules over life. All of life. We are called to honor God in every aspect of our lives – through our work, our leisure, our care of the neighbor, our care for the earth, and, yes, the way we spend money.

"Give to God what belongs to God." This word from Jesus becomes a mantra for all of life.

You've heard me say, more than once, "never resist a generous impulse."

Never resist the generous act of compassion or kindness or giving away food or money or time to one in need, as well being on the receiving end of a generous impulse. Now, you will most likely hear me say “never resist a generous impulse” again but it is also important to say that the practice of generosity can never be merely consigned to the realm of the impulsive.

Faith practices are regular, consistent, disciplined ways of practicing our trust in God. They change us and nurture us and they provide a witness to others.

So, we do regular things ...

- We meet to make Eucharist every Sunday
- We keep Sabbath
- We take up daily disciplines of prayer and worship and study
- We engage in acts of forgiveness, reconciliation, compassion and justice
- We engage in the practice of regular giving

These habits train us to be God’s people.

We began our service today with the Thanksgiving for Baptism, giving thanks not just for the gift of water itself, but the ways God used water to save us. Noah saved from the flood. God’s people saved through the Red Sea. Jesus baptized at the Jordan.

Later in the service we pray the Great Thanksgiving at the table. There we give thanks for God’s saving goodness, especially the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

These central prayers these train us in the way of gratitude. I think that’s especially important when in our consumerist society, we are trained to only give thanks for what we have. These prayers give thanks for who we are – a people made new and forgiven and healed by God through Christ.

So, it is with regular practices of giving. When we tithe or get into a regular practice of giving we are shaped and formed and trained to be generous people whose lives are lived in response to a most generous God.

Our lives of prayer are a discernment around deciding how we serve God in all areas of life and when it comes to money, we discern how much we give to the church, and how much we spend on home and family, friends, charities, works of justice, friends, neighbors, and, yes, leisure.

The fun or the struggle is to discern how it all shakes out.

Regular giving or tithing an important way and life-giving way to practice such trust in God.

Today, at the end of the service you will receive Commitments cards for 2018. Congregational members that is. Dear visitors, they are not for you. And you get to have a week to discern or pray over what your commitment for 2018 will be. The chart on percentage giving is a tool for you to calculate what it might look like to increase your pledge to work toward a tithe – and by tithe we mean giving 10% to the church – or growing toward tithing.

I can give testimony, just as Sallie did last week and John did date week before. For me, regular giving prevents me from loving money too much and consistently brings me joy and helps me grow in the ways of generosity.

Right now, my wife Britt gives 10% to her church, St. Luke's and I give 12% to PRLC. This tithing practice didn't happen overnight. It took me years to grow into it and I share that with you to say that the giving of the first fruits to God continues to give me great joy and helps shape my heart toward the things of God. Even as do our personal and family budget – and that in itself is a necessary discipline – I continue to discover with the generous impulse and the practice or regular giving to see that the distinctive Christian witness around money is counter-cultural. For Christians, the goal isn't to keep money but to give it away.

Yesterday, we had a confirmation retreat for our 6th and 7th graders, along with our friends from St. John United and Ballard First. I must say that some of the comments shared in our small group time from these young saints were rather amazing. Early in the day I asked a small group what it is that gets in the way or becomes a barrier in our walk with God. Without missing a beat one of our sisters in Christ, a PRLC member I might add, replied, "Money." She went on to say how it sometimes gets a hold of our hearts and fills us with greed.

Later in the day, I asked another small group who or what our idols are. Again, without hesitation, one of our young friends (a PRLC member), said, "Money." And then she spoke eloquently about the trap of having a lot and wanting more. She said "the problem with having a lot is that we get caught in the trap of wanting more and more and more. Then we're never satisfied."

It dawned on me that greed – "an unbelievable scoundrel" as Luther was fond of saying – and the effects of greed are obvious. I was also awed by the wisdom of our younger saints.

Tithing is a way to counter that false sense that we never have enough and prevents us from loving money too much. And allow me to add one more thing. Regular giving or tithing is an act of resistance.

- Resisting the principalities and powers.
- Resisting the heart turned inward.
- Resisting "an unbelieving scoundrel" named greed.

- Resisting the gods of consumerism and their false promise that life and happiness always comes with a price tag.

“To render unto God what belongs to God ... to give to God what belongs to God.”

When Jesus asked the Pharisees and Herodians to show him the coins, he drew their attention an image they were carrying around that in many ways symbolized a power that could led them away from the things of God.

What image or symbol points to that which leads you away from God?

And thanks are to God for a different kind of image. One that is eternal. An image that we do not carry around in our pockets but what that has been stamped in our hearts by God and traced on our bodies at baptism.

That's the sign of the cross pointing to an all-together different notion of power. The sign of God's most generous love and the sign of our very life in Christ.

The sign says that we discover true life not in getting but in giving.

We are bearers of this image. And so we seek to live in the truth that everything belongs to God. Amen.