11-12/13-16 Rev. Amy Haines

Luke 20:20-26 Giving Where It Belongs

I have often said that God’s timing is definitely not my timing. It was late September when I chose this passage and this weekend to focus on how we live out our faith through our financial stewardship. At that time, I forgot that this was the weekend following the presidential election. And at that time, who would have been able to predict not only the outcome of the election, but also the fear that preceded and follows this election? So for us to be talking about this passage today, for us to be stepping out in faith this weekend through our financial commitments for the coming year, is God’s timing. I pray we are open to what God has to say to us today.

Whatever your views and feelings on stewardship, thank you for being present in worship today. I know that for some of you, reflecting on your finances from a faith perspective is not easy. You may think that preaching on money is meddling in your private affairs. You and I may disagree on the details of where to give our tithes to God. Finances may be tight at home, or a sore spot of discussion in your household. Thank you for being open to listening to God’s voice call us all to deeper stewardship as disciples of Jesus.

Traditionally, a steward is a manager or trustee accountable for the care, upkeep and responsibility of someone else’s property or possessions.

To be a steward of God is to believe that everything we have in life is a gift from God, and technically we don’t own or claim anything as our own. God is the owner and God is the provider.

To be a steward of God is when we believe that everything we have in life has been entrusted to our care by God—our lives and our relationships, our money and our possessions, our care for the earth and for all living things—all of this is to be managed by us for the purpose and glory of God.

To be a steward of God is to make a lifestyle choice that recognizes everything is a gift from God and lives in response to that gift. Or in the words of Jesus in today’s Scripture passage, we give to God what belongs to God.

Over 2000 years ago Jesus was asked a question meant to trap him into giving the wrong response. Have you ever suddenly found yourself in a conversation in which you know anything you say will be the wrong response?

A wife is going through her closet and asks her husband, “Honey, does this make me look fat?” A teen who snuck out to attend a party is asked by a parent, who knows the teen snuck out, “Did you attend the party last night?” Either way, the teen is busted. A friend is passionate about politics and asks, “Do you believe we should deport all illegal immigrants, regardless of age?” If you are honest and disagree with your friend, they either get mad and walk away or they passionately argue with you, determined to change your mind.

Couched in a compliment about respect, honesty and truth, the Pharisees and Herodians asked for Jesus’ opinion on whether or not it was lawful to pay taxes to the Roman Emperor, Caesar. Yet their question was a trap.

If Jesus said yes, it was lawful, the crowd would turn against him, viewing Jesus as a betrayer to his own people, for they hated the head tax that lined the Roman Emperor’s coffers, a tax that every occupied Israelite had to pay to their occupiers in Rome. If Jesus said, no, it was not lawful, then the Herodians, loyal to Rome, would view Jesus as a radical revolutionary dead set against the tax and have him arrested for sedition.

Jesus recognized the trap they had set for him. Calling them hypocrites, he refused to give a yes or no response. Instead, he asked them for a coin. “Let me see one of the coins used for paying taxes.” And one of these Jewish leaders produced a Roman coin from their coin purse, doing so while standing in the midst of the Jewish Temple. The significance of this exchange is that Roman coinage was not allowed to be used in the Temple for an offering. Only Temple coins were to be in the Temple. Roman coins were considered unclean in the holy of holies.

Now if procuring an unclean coin for a dreaded tax within the walls of the Temple wasn’t enough for Jesus to turn the trap back on these religious leaders, his next question fully upended the trap they had set for him. “Whose head and title is on this coin? Whose image and name are engraved on this piece of silver?” The religious leaders replied, “The Emperor’s.” The Emperor. The Roman Emperor, Caesar, whose title was the Son of God. His image was engraved on the coin. His title was engraved on the coin. Caesar, the occupying authority, who demanded to be worshiped as a god.

While the denarius was the common currency under Roman occupation, for a religious leader to have it in his possession within the Temple was breaking the first two commandments of God—no other gods, and no graven images. Those who sought to trap Jesus knew that he had exposed them instead.

Yet Jesus wasn’t done. He finally answered their question…in his own way. “Give to the Emperor the things that are the Emperor’s and give to God the things that are God’s.” And the religious leaders’ response was amazement and silence.

Give to the Emperor what belongs to the Emperor…

Today you and I thankfully do not have an emperor who rules our country, but we do have a government that demands we pay our taxes. Sales tax—property tax—income tax—and more. We may grumble about what we must pay, yet pay we must. Not too many of us are going to try to circumvent the IRS. We give to the government what belongs to the government. We also must pay our creditors who loaned us money or extended us credit. These are the emperors of our day—taxes and loans and credit card bills.

Romans 13:7 would also call us to respect our civil authorities, when it says: “Pay to all what is due them—taxes to whom taxes are due, revenue to whom revenue is due, respect to whom respect is due, honor to whom honor is due.”

We are still called to be faithful citizens in this country. We still can honor the values of our land and pay our respects to the veterans who have fought and died for such values.

We still are called to exercise our right to vote according to our conscience. We still have a duty to God and to country. Jesus does not negate our responsibility as citizens. Jesus does, however, remind us that our higher allegiance is to God.

Give to God what belongs to God…

We have no money, no bills, no currency with God’s picture on it. Our giving to the church is not a government tax nor is it an act of civil disobedience. We do not receive a bill for our tithing each month nor have pastors who demand automatic withdrawals from our checking accounts.

So what belongs to God that we can give back to God? According to Genesis 1:27: “God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.” As the Roman coin bore the image of the Emperor, we all bear the image of God in our very being. As we are created in God’s image, then everything we have and everything we are belongs to God.

This means we are to give back to God all of ourselves--all of our prayers, our presence, and our gifts all of our resources of time, money, energy and skill all of our service and witness to share faith, life and the good news of Jesus with others all of our trust and faith and hope in the One who created us and calls us, who forgives us and frees us.

Although we give honor where honor is due to our elected officials and we pay our bills in a timely manner to all our creditors, our first allegiance is to God, our sole worship is of God, and all areas of our lives ought to be influenced by our faith as we follow God’s Son Jesus.

Clarence Stoughton once said, "Stewardship is everything you do after you say, 'Yes' to Jesus." --gbod.org, stewardship

Stewardship is an intentional choice to live for God—as well as a lifelong challenge. It is not easy to live intentionally for God in the midst of a materialistic culture. It is not easy to make hard choices that place God at the center rather than the edges of our priorities.

Yet when we make an intentional financial commitment to God through the church, our giving is our faithful response of gratitude for God’s presence in our lives. It is our ways of saying thanks for our salvation through Jesus, our hope of new life now and for all eternity, and for God’s ongoing presence that strengthens and guides us to live as disciples in the midst of daily life.

A mother once learned this stewardship lesson from her son. She wrote,

“A few weeks ago, I sat down at the breakfast table to write our pledge check to the church. Johnnie, our five-year-old son picked up our offering envelope and asked, “Mom who are you sending this envelope to?” Seeking to be a model parent, and hoping to impart some wisdom to my little boy, I welcomed this opportunity to teach him about giving. I replied, too simply as it turns out, “This is a special envelope. We are sending money to God.” Johnnie brought joy to my heart as he, looking thoughtful for moment, said, “Mom, I hate to tell you, but everything belongs to God. This is just the part you’re giving back.”

 (Stewardship, Parish Publishing, 10-05)

Today we are invited to consider the question, “What percentage of my income is God calling me to give?” What intentionally am I giving back to God that belongs to God in the first place? What intentional financial commitment is God calling me to give to this local congregation next year, to share in its ministries and missions, as a sign of my relationship with God through faith in Jesus Christ?

We all are called to start our giving somewhere and sometime. For those of you who have always given the biblical standard of a tithe, or 10% of your income, commit to paper what you already practice. For those of you who are even more generous givers, maybe God is calling you to commit 20%. If last year you committed 4%, maybe God is inviting you to commit 6% this year.

For those of you who have never given an intentional amount, I invite you to figure out what percentage of income you have sporadically given this year and step up even 1% over that amount. Maybe you are one who throws in a $10 bill only when you have it in your wallet. Prayerfully consider if you can commit to $10 every week. Maybe you figure out that you have only been giving an average of 1% of your income back to the Lord in faithful giving. Commit next year to 2%. Maybe you have only been giving the national average of 3% and God is inviting you to step up to 4%. Maybe God is calling you to take a leap of faith and jump up to a tithe of 10%. Prayerfully decide where to begin and stick to that commitment, as you are able, over the coming year.

Today we are invited to consider the question, “What percentage of my income is God calling me to give?” If you are not currently a tither, giving 10% or more, committing to a specific percentage- even only 1 or 2% this year- is the best way to be intentional in your giving. For when we are intentional in our giving, then we are offering to God our first fruits rather than our leftovers. When our offering check is one of the first checks we write rather than the last, we are reminding ourselves that God is a priority in our lives. And when God is a priority in our lives, we will become more intentional in giving to God what belongs to God in all areas of our lives.

..John.D. Rockefeller once said, "I never would have been able to tithe the first million dollars I ever made if I had not tithed my first salary, which was $1.50 per week." --W. A. Criswell, A Guidebook for Pastors, p. 154.

..J.L. Kraft, head of the Kraft Cheese Corporation, gave approximately 25% of his enormous income to Christian causes for many years. He once said, "The only investment I ever made which has paid consistently increasing dividends is the money I have given to the Lord." --W. A. Criswell, A Guidebook for Pastors, p. 154.

In one of my former congregations there was a woman who grew up in a Catholic congregation and household where tithing was expected and practiced. For her, intentional, faithful giving was second nature, a natural response of faith. She was even known to tithe to the church on what she inherited from her family members.

In that same congregation there was a woman whose family worked multiple jobs, did not practice tithing and only attended worship 2 of 4 Sundays a month. Even though she was the church treasurer, she had never considered her finances as part of her discipleship. She and her husband gave whatever was in their wallet on the days when they worshipped with the congregation. Several years went by of her hearing stewardship preached and taught and encouraged and finally her heart and head were ready to hear God’s call to stewardship.

She committed to percentage giving, to an intentional amount each month, and in doing so found her perspective on faith and money change as she desired to be faithful in all areas of her life. She began to write a check to the church when paying her household’s bills instead of waiting for the days she attended worship and threw whatever she had in the plate.

As she intentionally gave, she also began to hunger more for God’s word and attended Sunday School and Bible study. She began to find new ways to serve, all from the perspective of giving to others from the blessings she had received from God. The more she gave, the more she shared, and the more her priorities began to align with God’s desires.

..The concept of biblical stewardship, Pastor Sam Wilder reminds us, is God’s wonderful way of asking us to see things differently, to weigh things differently, and to live differently. --Sam Wilder sermoncentral.com 5-04 adapted

Are we ready to see all that we are and all that we have as gifts of God entrusted to our care? Are we ready to view money as a resource for God’s good work in this world rather than view money as only the currency that pays our bills and supplements our pleasure? Are we ready to live in ways where our giving reflects our relationship with Jesus, and the closer we grow to God the deeper our faith is lived out in our giving?

In such an uncertain climate as our current political atmosphere, making a financial commitment today for 2017 may be a bold way to say I will live by faith, not fear. I will trust in God, and trust that God will work through the ministries of the church in this community and around the world to be the hands and feet and heart of Christ.

“We are judged by what we do, and only in doing can we give example. Christians practice stewardship by sharing with those in need their God-given time, talents, and money, as an act of thanks to God for all his gifts to them.” (Stewardship by Parish Publishing, 10-05)

..Following her pastor’s appeal for a great and worthy cause, one woman in the church came to him after the service and handed over a check for $50, giving over and above her regular financial commitment, asking at the same time if her gift was satisfactory. The pastor immediately replied, “If it represents you.”

There was a silent moment of soul-searching before the woman asked for the check back. She left with it and a couple of days later returned with a check for $5,000 and again asked the same question, “Is my gift satisfactory?” The pastor responded with the same answer as before, “If it represents you.” As before, the truth seemed to drive deeply. After a few moments of hesitation she took back the check and left.

Later in the week she came again with a check, this time for $50,000. As she placed it in the pastor’s hand, she said, “After earnest, prayerful thought, I have come to the conclusion that this gift does represent me and my faith journey and I am happy to give it.”

 --John Allen Lavender, Illustrations Unlimited: Stewardship, p.462 #15 adapted

Now most of us here today cannot write out a check for $50,000. Yet there is an amount God is calling each one of us to give. In just a moment I will invite you to bring forward your Commitment Card. May your giving represent you. May it show a faithful giver, an intentional giver, a thankful giver, regardless of what percentage God is asking you to give this year. May it show a child of God giving back to God from the blessings of God in our lives and in our world. May it show a faithful steward giving to God what belongs to God.

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Now is the time that God asks for your response. How will you give a concrete expression of your faith commitment through your financial giving?

Each household was mailed a commitment card last week, with an invitation to be in prayer about how to respond to the question, “What percentage of my income God is calling me to give?”

If you are **visiting** with us today, please be in prayer for those around you. This commitment service is something this congregation does once a year.

If you did not bring your card with you today, you may turn it into the office still this month, or there are extra cards in each pew and from the ushers.

If you do not wish to complete a Commitment Card at this time, know that we respect that your faith decision is between you and God.

God loves us all. Each time the Lord’s Supper is celebrated in this sanctuary, we are reminded of God’s great love for us when we take a piece of ordinary bread and a cup of ordinary grape juice. During Holy Communion the common elements of bread and cup symbolize the deepest meanings of our faith. The Commitment Cards are on ordinary paper, written on by an ordinary pen. Yet these ordinary writing elements will symbolize our response to God’s love as lived out in our financial commitment over the next year. During our final hymn/song, I invite you to bring your commitment card to this offering plate at the front of the sanctuary as an act of worship.

May God then honor all of our gifts, given intentionally and generously, given this day and throughout the next year.

Let us pray…

Thanks, O God, for allowing us to be a part of your ministry in this world. Some of us cannot commit much; Others of us commit far more than what is symbolized by this card. Large or small, a giant leap or timid first step of faith, or a commitment of ongoing dedication, bless each one here today, O God, and the commitment they make here and now to you. Guide us to be wise stewards of your blessings. Guide us that through our giving we may be a blessing to others. Guide us to give back to you as a sign that we belong to you. Receive our commitments as our act of worship. Lead us and guide us, then, to be your people, led by faith, as we go from this place. Surround us with your peace, your promises, and your presence, God Almighty. Amen.