3/20-21/21 Lent in Plain Sight: Coins Rev. Amy Haines

Mark 12:13-17

Did you ever have a piggy bank growing up, or some other place to put your coins? Do you remember raiding that piggy bank to buy candy or a toy, or did your family make you keep your piggy bank untouched, saving up for later?

My children all have piggy banks, and Ken has a larger can for his coins. Each time we move, we cash in whatever coins are in Ken’s coin can. I am always amazed at how quickly those pennies and nickels and dimes and quarters add up.

Another place I see coins add up is through our Bright Beginnings children’s church offering.

Each month the children bring their coins to worship, and those coins support two World Vision friends, Titus and Nyimba in Namibia.

Consider how many coins you have on your person right now. Are there any in your pocket, or is it too early in the day? How many are in your purses, just waiting to be spent? How many are piled on your dresser or countertop?

Over the past year, as our culture went more cashless, finding places to take our coins has sometimes been a challenge. Restaurants and grocery stores don’t want to take cash and coin.

It slows them down. Or at one point they didn’t have enough coins to make exact change.

Yet coins are still part of the fabric of our lives. We may take them for granted, or we may value them, we may enjoy them by themselves, or combine and exchange them for larger bills, but coins are still part of our everyday lives.

Today, as we conclude our Lenten journey, the coins in our pockets and the coins in our piggy banks challenge us to reflect on where our loyalty lies. Is our loyalty to the persons on the coins? Is our loyalty to our financial investments? Or is our loyalty to the One to whom everything belongs in heaven and on earth?

This is the sixth and final week of our Lenten journey, where we have looked for God among the ordinary elements in our lives—dust and masks, bread and cup, oil and shoes. Next week we begin the journey of Holy Week, a journey that begins with palms and coats and shouts of Hosanna and ends with nails and a cross and a crown of thorns before we can celebrate at the empty tomb of Easter. This week’s invitation to reflect on coins as a question of our loyalty

prepares us for Holy Week, when again we are invited to follow Jesus, crucified and risen.

To understand the power of today’s Scripture from the Gospel of Mark we first need to understand its context. This is a passage that occurs in all four gospels, although John places it early in Jesus’ ministry and the other three gospels have this scene occurring during Jesus’ final week in Jerusalem.

Imagine being in Jerusalem during that Passover season. The population has swelled as Jews from all over the known world gather for worship. And as the Jews rise in number, so do the number of Roman troops stationed there. Rome is always fearful of a Jewish revolt. So they appear with a show of force to threaten any who would cause trouble.

The Jewish leaders see Jesus as a troublemaker. They know he has arrived in Jerusalem, because the crowd was chanting and waving palm branches and making a big deal of his entrance. We’ll look at that story next week on Palm Sunday. They cannot stand how he is stirring up the crowd with his stories and parables and healings and care.

Two groups of Jews who typically despise each other, came together to try and trap Jesus,

in order to get him out of the way. The Pharisees were the Jewish scholars and leaders of the Temple. The Herodians were Jews who supported King Herod and Rome. In Jesus they saw a common enemy, one who challenged them both to live more by God’s way rather than their human ways of power and position.

Near the Temple, leaders from both groups approached Jesus to trap him.

“Teacher,” they said, “we know that you are a man of integrity. You aren’t swayed by others, because you pay no attention to who they are; but you teach the way of God in accordance with the truth. Is it right to pay the imperial tax to Caesar or not? Should we pay or shouldn’t we?” (NIV)

Start talking taxes, money or politics, and you are always in trouble. Here, these leaders honor Jesus with their words but not their hearts. They don’t believe Jesus is a man of integrity. They think Jesus is a fraud. They know he is not swayed by others, but they don’t like the truth he teaches. So they try to trap him with a question on taxes. Not all taxes, mind you, but the imperial tax. A poll tax, a tax Rome required from each and every citizen throughout the Roman empire. Is it lawful to pay this tax or not?

Jesus, knowing their hearts, knowing their hypocrisy, asks them for a coin. Specifically, a denarius. The denarius was the coin of the empire, a coin that had on it the image and title of Caesar Augustus. For a Jew to carry this coin went against the 10 Commandments that demand no graven images. Yet the Jews could not do business without these Roman coins, which were the currency of the day everywhere except in the Temple.

The Roman coin was offered to Jesus, and Jesus asked them, “Whose image and inscription is on this coin?” They answered, “The emperor’s.” “Caesar’s.”

Jesus then replied, ““Give to Caesar what is Caesar’s and to God what is God’s.”

And they were utterly amazed at his response.

Why? Why such amazement at his response? Because Jesus put these leaders in their place.

Much has been written about this verse over the years, yet suffice it to say Jesus was telling the leaders and the crowd surrounding them that only a little belongs to Caesar. This tax, for instance. But he reminded them once again that everything belongs to the Lord. God created the land on the earth. God put the metals in the earth that are minted into coins. God gave humanity the brains to figure out how to mint coins, how to create governments, how to care for one another. As the Psalmist declares, “The earth is the Lord’s and everything in it.”

They were still called to respect the laws and leaders of this land, while remembering that God still demands ultimate loyalty.

Roman citizens, even the Jews, were to think about their loyalty to the emperor every time they touched a Roman coin. They were to consider that without Rome, life would be filled with war and strife. Travel would be limited. They may not have the freedom to continue their worship in Jerusalem. While they worshipped the One True God, they were constantly challenged to divide their loyalty between God and the Emperor, who considered himself a God. No wonder the Jews hated Rome!

Jesus reminded these religious leaders once again to give to Caesar what is Caesar’s, but give to God what is God’s. And everything belongs to God. So their loyalty to Caesar is shown through paying taxes and obeying the law of the land, but in their hearts, nothing was to take the place of God. We reflect on this passage in this Lenten season to allow the coins in our pockets to ask us, where is our loyalty? What in our lives threatens to divide our loyalty, or pull it away from worship and faithfulness and obedience to God Almighty?

The coins in our pockets don’t have images of a god or an emperor who demands our worship.

Instead, they have images of past presidents and leaders of our country. Can you even name who is on each coin? I cannot. I take our money so much for granted that I had to look up that

The quarter has the image of George Washington. The dime bears the image of Franklin Roosevelt. The nickel has the image of Thomas Jefferson. And the penny bears the image of Abraham Lincoln. While important leaders in our country, we are not to worship our country’s leaders, past or present.

We are also not to place as ultimate loyalty the symbols and phrases found on the flip side of our coins. Monticello, state symbols, an olive branch, even the phrase “E Pluribus Unum” meaning “out of many, one.” While important values, they are still not to be held higher than

God’s kingdom standards of caring for one another and valuing the image of God in one another, an image that we see diminished time and time again when others don’t look or act exactly like us.

In a country heavily divided by politics, too often our political affiliations have become ultimate values higher than our faith in Jesus. Yet today Jesus reminds us, much like he reminded the Herodians and Pharisees, that nothing should be higher than our loyalty to the Lord of all.

The coins in our pockets can also represent our larger financial investments. How often do those investments demand our loyalty? Mortgages and debt, stocks and loans, purchases that are bigger and better than what we have now. How can our desire for more pull us away from God and God’s ways of community and care for one another? How does what we own keep us from being generous and faithful with our tithes and offerings?

Jill Duffield echoes many a Christian’s thoughts when she wrote:

…I often wish the ledger of my checking account was off-limits to my Lord. … Life would be far less complicated if Jesus allowed me to compartmentalize my economic choices from my spiritual practices.

--Jill Duffield *Lent in Plain Sight* p.76-78

Jesus, however, calls us to more. To remember everything we own is a gift from God. To remember we are called not to systems of exploitation, but actions of generosity. To remember our communal living is part of our generous giving.

Oseola McCarty knew the truth of generous living that supported her community.

..Born in 1908 in rural Mississippi, she quit school after sixth grade to support her ailing aunt,

spending the rest of her life as a washerwoman. She never married, lived quietly in her community, and attended church regularly with a Bible held together with Scotch tape.

Throughout the years, the people of Hattiesburg paid her in coins and dollar bills to keep them looking freshly pressed. She found immense dignity in her work, noting that hard work gives life meaning. In 1995, at the age of eighty-six, she contacted the University of Southern Mississippi

to let them know she would be donating a portion of her life savings to fund scholarships for African-American students to receive the education she had missed—a sum of $150,000.

She said, “I know it won’t be too many years before I pass on, and I just figured the money would do them a lot more good than it would me.”

 -adapted from *Jen Wilkin, In His Image, Crossway.* thepastorsworkshop.com: generosity

Our coins challenge our loyalty, our sense of community, and our generosity.

In this season of Lent, I cannot preach a sermon on coins without thinking of two other scenes that involve coins from Jesus’ final week in Jerusalem. They, too challenge our loyalty.

In Mark 11, Jesus overturned tables and drove out the moneychangers in the Temple courtyard.

While the selling of animals for sacrifice and the exchange of Roman coins for Jewish coins had its place, Jesus was tired of a system that exploited the poor instead of caring for them. He was tired of the hypocrisy of religious actions that pulled people away from worship of the One True God.

Bringing that passage to our world today, Jill Duffield says….

..When money is loaned at exorbitant rates to those without other options, Jesus forms a whip of cords. When merchants price gouge in the aftermath of a disaster, Jesus starts turning tables. When corporations create fake accounts, add fees, and penalize those unable to pay them, Jesus’ anger grows. When worship becomes an occasion for exploiting people, Jesus unleashes his wrath. How we earn and use our coins matters to Jesus. It matters a great deal, in fact. Jesus cares about how we behave not just in the temple but just outside of it and well beyond its doors. Gentile or Jew, merchant, currency changer, or worshiper, how we make our money concerns the Lord of all.

 --Jill Duffield *Lent in Plain Sight* p.76-78

While I have heard people say time and again the church should stay out of the business of the world, we are called to take a stand against systems and practices that exploit others and neglect the poor. As business leaders as well as consumers, Jesus challenges us to look at our coins and reflect on how we treat one another financially. Are we people of integrity,

and show our loyalty to Christ through our spending and tipping and habits of generosity?

Or do we follow in Judas’ footsteps, betraying Jesus in our desire for more?

Judas is the other image of coins that comes to us during Holy Week. For thirty pieces of silver,

he waited for a time to betray Jesus to the religious leaders. This was one of Jesus’ 12 disciples,

the one trusted with the moneybag. This was one who had seen Jesus do miraculous things,

one who had heard his words of God’s kingdom ways. Maybe Judas wanted Jesus to do more.

He surely never expected Jesus to die on a cross. How does Judas challenge us not to sell our souls, lessen our integrity, or give in to the idolatry of money or power or position?

Jesus calls us to more, even as we wind down this Lenten season. Jesus calls us to look at our coins and remember the earth is the Lord’s and everything in it. Jesus calls us to honor God

through our spending and our saving, through our investments and our generosity, through our values and our habits. Jesus calls us to remember that money will not save us; only God can and will redeem our souls, our hearts, our lives.

Our redemption is not for sale. It was bought with Jesus’ life on the cross. It is still a gift from God. May we respond to such a gift through our loyalty, our faithfulness, and our intentional living that follows the ways of God.

May we continue to see God in the ordinary of our lives, each and every day, and respond in faith and thankfulness. May it be so.