

## **“Looking Back”**

October 4, 2020

A *Wonder-Full Life* series – Livestream

World Communion Sunday

Looking back...It happens every time I meet with a couple preparing for marriage. I get to know their story – how they met, how they grew closer and eventually fell in love, and why they want to be married. That’s usually pretty easy information to glean. Most of us want to talk about the good stuff – the happy stuff – the love stuff.

It’s when the conversation turns to the deeper issues that it can get a little uncomfortable. When I ask about family conflict or difficult relationships, sometimes there’s a hesitancy to share. And when we get to money and household budgets and finances, the same thing happens – some anxiety and discomfort. Maybe we’ve been conditioned to avoid talking about money.

In some families, money is secret. Nothing is shared and not much guidance given. Money isn’t talked about at all and can become shrouded in shame and even fear. One person said that she wished her parents would’ve given her a book about money instead of a book about sex (or at least in addition to it!). It’s important to learn about how to manage money. It doesn’t come automatically, even if our parents and families don’t struggle.

In other families, money is private. Perhaps it’s talked about within the family boundary, but probably not with anyone outside of it. That seems like a good balance, except when private becomes a block to offering help to others or receiving help from others. Private can slowly move to a place of pridefulness: *It’s my own business. No one needs to know what I do with what I have.*

Whatever our experience, we learn about money from other people, and we learn early. Think about your earliest money memory and how you grew up relating to money. Is money a source of worry, or conflict, or a tool that can be used for good? When I meet with couples before a wedding, I don’t need to know every detail about their finances, but it’s important for them to talk about money because it’s one of the topics that can be a major stressor in marriage and in life. They can grow closer to being on the same page looking at finances in realistic and healthy ways to avoid major conflict, but it requires honesty.

And it’s the same for any of us. I’d guess that each of us can point to a time in our lives when finances were a point of stress – whether individually or in our family or marriage. No one wants to share about financial struggles or bad financial decisions or the reality that they’re living paycheck to paycheck, but we can relate. Money is hard to

talk about, especially when we're struggling. We see that in George Bailey – truly discouraged and fearful of what's ahead, especially after he's worked hard and sacrificed for others. In this present moment, when so much has changed for so many people, including finances, money is on our minds.

I'm also not suggesting that we broadcast everything about our finances to the world, but it's important to understand our attitudes about money and how they're formed. Those attitudes are a part of our inheritance just as much as anything else we actually receive. What did we learn and observe from the people around us? And how can we continue to move toward deeper faith and trust when it comes to money and living meaningful lives?

For some of us, the influence of growing up in the Depression-era or parents who lived through that era parents is clear. For others, that sense of frugality is foreign. For some of us, the idea of being in debt has never crossed our minds. We don't buy it if we don't have the money for it. For others, credit cards are a way of life; we use them consistently. Buying online is normal for some as is clear from the deliveries that come to our doorsteps, but not for others. Would you believe that someone received a credit card application addressed to their dog?

Beyond the practical issues, these are spiritual matters. It's easy to think that we can separate money from our spiritual lives if we never made the connection. Some of us have clear modeling for tithing and giving offering, but others of us don't. Even now, we want to love and serve God, but it's challenging to remember that how we view and use money is a part of following Jesus. We know that Jesus is Lord, but we struggle to remember that means that all of our lives – even our relationship to money – is under God's reign. When we say that Jesus is Lord of all, it means everything.

That's what we encounter in the Gospel today. Jesus is asked to offer advice about taxes, but it's really an attempt to trap him. The Pharisees and Herodians have it all planned out to trick Jesus with a question about taxes as a reaction to his outrageous indictments toward them – telling parables that put them in the hot seat. Even back then, taxes were a volatile issue!

When we understand that Herodians and Pharisees usually didn't agree on much of anything, it's even more interesting. Pharisees were Jewish teachers who followed Jewish Law very closely. They didn't like being governed by Roman rulers. They weren't supposed to recognize anyone but God as King. They resented this "poll tax" as it was called – because it meant submission to Rome. And they were hoping that the Messiah would overthrow the Roman government. Jesus hadn't lived up to their hopes of a military victor.

The Herodians were against Jesus, too. They were Jews, a priestly class, but they actually supported Roman rule and were loyal to Herod. Jesus had been a threat to the Roman king's power since his birth, and it was still true. The Herodians wanted to discredit Jesus, too. Jesus is a threat to their power and the status quo.

So they ask a question: *should we pay taxes to the emperor or not?* If Jesus says yes, then he loses the Pharisees completely. It's blasphemy to support Rome. If Jesus says no, then he could be accused of treason by the Herodians. Anything less than supporting Rome was considered a revolt.

Jesus tricks them by asking for a coin with a picture of Tiberius Caesar on it and a slogan that affirmed his divinity. The coin was an example of idolatry. Jesus addresses more than taxes or even whether religious people should follow civil law. It's about stewardship – how we use everything that God has provided. It's about how we live as everyday disciples of Jesus Christ. Jesus' answer is about authority – and the ultimate authority in our lives is God – and Jesus is God's full revelation.

It's easy to say that we live under God's authority, but we fight against materialism and consumerism every day – the temptation to let what we have and what we can get to take over our lives. We believe that we are made in the image of God. Just like the coin that bears Caesar's image, everything that bears God's image or inscription is God's. *If we give the coin to the emperor because it is his image on it, then what is it that we give to God because God's image is on it?*

Jesus reply is a challenge and a radical call, but that's what stewardship is really about – whose authority we live under. Living under God's authority – everything under God's authority – means understanding how we view money and how we make meaning. Jesus is talking about giving to God what is God's – remembering who we are and how we can work for the Kingdom of God now.

Stewardship of our whole lives, including money, is tied to what we believe about ourselves and how we understand our relationship to all of God's gifts. If we claim to be made in the image of God, and if we follow Jesus' advice to give God what belongs to God, then our values and lifestyle must reflect that, but we're affected by the influence of others – for good and not-so-great, the tensions of abundance or scarcity, the fear of having enough while looking to the future.

There's a story about a man who was worried because his son was losing interest in church, so he asked his pastor to have a talk with his son. The pastor began, "Your father is concerned that you're showing little interest in the church. At the very least, I should think you would want to be as interested as he is."

The son responded, "Have you ever asked him to give \$5,000 to the church?" "Well, no," the pastor said. "But I know that he gave \$500 to the benevolence fund."

The son replied, “Well, it cost him \$5,000 to be a member of the country club. When he gives \$5,000 to the church, then we’ll talk.”

It’s a powerful story – and a gut punch - because it reminds me of how we model and learn, how we order our lives with integrity – and how we sometimes separate money from the whole of our lives. Jesus’ call to follow him may force a change to our values and lifestyle because we have to recognize the truth and transfer our trust. The truth is that we belong to God, and we have to trust God to lead in every area of our lives. That doesn’t mean that everything will be easy, even when it comes to money.

We’re accountable to God for what we do have – not what we don’t have. So often, we compare ourselves to others, especially when it comes to money, but Jesus doesn’t say anything about looking around at our neighbor. He simply says, “Give to God what is God’s.” A call for us to re-examine our lives in light of who we are – beloved children created in the image of God.

I think we really do want God’s vision for our lives to be our vision for our lives. We want to give with purpose and meaning and joy – not out of anxiety and fear. We’re invited to consider our attitudes about money – and all of God’s gifts. How do we operate? What needs to change so that we can find joy in giving without being held back by fear?

This month, we’ll be invited to offer our faith commitments. We’ll be asked to make a commitment of our prayers, presence, gifts, service, and witness as a part of the Body of Christ. This practice isn’t meant to cause pressure or guilt, but really is a spiritual practice and discipline to open our hearts and consider how we will participate in God’s vision for our lives. I was in a workshop recently where the presenter said that we’re “stewards of Jesus’ dream” for the world - building God’s Kingdom here and now.

I love that phrase and keep thinking how powerful it is – that all of us are a part of Jesus’ work. Jesus needs us, and we need him. And today we come to the table and remember that we’re connected to the world God loves and every person who wants to follow Jesus. We’re given a blessed gift in this sacrament. So join your heart with mine in prayer:

Almighty God, from the ends of the earth you have gathered us around Christ's holy table. We come to feast together with thanks and praise.

Have mercy on your church, troubled and divided.

Renew us and make us one. Amen.