

GOD GIVES IT BACK

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Grace Church in New York
The Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost
October 16, 2011

Jesus said, “*Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s.*” (Matthew 22:21)

When I was about ten years old, two minor miracles occurred that profoundly influenced what I believe today about giving. One day my mother and I were walking to the Grand Union supermarket in Glen Ridge, NJ. To this day I could take you to the very spot where we were on Hillside Avenue when I spotted it, the first miracle: a thick stack of rolled-up green paper bills, lying on the sidewalk where someone had undoubtedly dropped it. I picked up the wad and we counted the amount: exactly thirty dollars. This was the early 1970’s; my allowance was about 35 cents per week. Thirty dollars was an absolute fortune for someone my age. The first thing my mother made me do was take the money to the supermarket manager and report the find. The manager suggested we leave the money with him, and if after a week no one reported the loss, it would be ours. A week later the money was still there; it was mine to keep.

How would I spend it? My parents mentioned that they thought a good idea would be to give it away. “Excuse me? Give it away?” I protested. “Exactly,” they said! And then they began introducing me to the joys of giving. We talked about all the possible places where I could send the money, and the good it might accomplish. The more we talked the less I protested. Soon I began enjoying the decision-making process. In the end I gave ten dollars to the Glen Ridge Athletic Association, which made possible my little league baseball team. I gave ten dollars to our church. And for ten dollars, in memory of my grandmother, I bought a stone to help build the National Cathedral, which was unfinished at the time. Giving the money away was not my idea; the thought never would have crossed my mind. But thanks to my parents, that thirty dollars brought enormous satisfaction to me – far more than it would have had I just spent it on myself.

Before I mention the second miracle, let me turn our thoughts to today’s readings from Matthew and Isaiah. Matthew records an incident for us that highlights the growing hostility of the Pharisees towards Jesus. In first-century Palestine, the Pharisees were the Jewish religious authorities who interpreted the Law of Moses and translated how, precisely, to obey it. Jesus, the itinerate rabbi, was preaching a new and radical way to follow the Law and fulfill it. The way of Jesus clashed with the way of the Pharisees, so these institutional clerics became ever more determined to silence the rival voice. They wanted to entangle Jesus in his talk, and either get him trouble with the Roman authorities, or get him in trouble with the Jewish people. So the Pharisees crafted what they imagined would be the perfect, inescapable lose-lose question for Jesus: “*Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?*” If Jesus said no, he would arouse the ire of Rome and be arrested. If he said yes, he would lose favor with the Jewish people and be ignored. The Pharisees were insufferably pleased with their little scheme. Either way Jesus would lose. But Jesus didn’t lose. The genius of Jesus was in the way he completely side-stepped the snare. “*Give, therefore, to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s.*”

Two adjectives might best describe what Jesus thought of the Pharisees’ question. Number-one, it was irrelevant. Number-two, it was hypocritical. The question was utterly irrelevant because paying taxes to the emperor was simply the economic law of the land.

Counseling ordinary citizens to disobey Roman law would only set them on the road to disaster. Rome had a long and brutal history of dealing with dissidents, and everyone knew it. But the question was irrelevant on a deeper, theological level. It struck at the age-old, yet misguided desire to separate spirit from substance, to detach mystery from matter, to disconnect God from money. You see, within the Judaism of Jesus' day, certain groups adamantly believed that truly spiritual people should shun the material order. Truly spiritual people should spurn money, especially unclean Roman coins that had the emperor's idolatrous image and claims stamped on them. God and money don't mix. Mystery and matter cannot dwell together. But the false dichotomy between spirit and substance was then, and remains today, irrelevant. We who are dwellers in time and space have no choice but to deal with flesh and blood, bricks and mortar, stocks and bonds, bread and wine. And we have no access whatsoever to the spiritual realm except through God's created order – that which we can taste and see and touch. Jesus saves us not from the world, but in the world and through the world. So the Pharisees' question, on every level, was irrelevant.

The question was also hypocritical. When the Pharisees posed it, Jesus told them to show him a coin used for the tax. Quick as a flash, one of the Pharisees produced a denarius – the Roman coin with the emperor's image on it. But wait: if the Pharisees were serious about being truly spiritual people, why did at least one of them have the unclean Roman coin in his toga pocket? The answer is simple: they weren't practicing the irrelevant message they preached. They were hypocrites. They were completely enmeshed in the material order, trading within the Roman economic system, and mixing God with money.

Jesus also mixed God and money. In fact, he preached about money and possessions more than any other topic. Money is a spiritual concern for every household of faith and every individual. Those of us who call ourselves the people of Grace Church know that every October we talk about money in spiritual and specific terms. Why? Because ministry costs money. Whenever the Broadway doors open to welcome tourists and pilgrims alike, whenever the choirs sing or the clergy give counsel, whenever the bells ring and remind pedestrians to lift up their eyes, at some point down the line a bill has to be paid. It costs money to reach out to the poor, to spread the good news of God in Christ, to visit the sick, to give rest to the weary, to teach children in the Sunday School and through the GO Project. Spiritual people intent on doing God's work cannot shun money. We need an operating budget. At Grace Church our operating budget has three major sources of revenue: a responsible draw from invested funds, income from the Loft Building at 80 4th Avenue, and the annual pledges that you and I make.

This year we have a special challenge before us. To complete the current and critical phase of interior restoration we are borrowing from our invested funds, otherwise known as the endowment. Make no mistake, we fully intend to pay ourselves back and have a plan to do so, but until we do the endowment will be less able to seed the operating budget. This means that we either reduce the size of our budget, or look to our other two sources of revenue to fill the gap. The Loft Building can do a bit more, and the Vestry and I are hoping that all of us can do a bit more too. Are you getting nervous, or perhaps annoyed by my apparent craven comingling of God and money? I'm not finished yet; within a few days my pastoral reach will extend all the way to your mailbox at home. In the past week I've signed hundreds of letters that you should all be receiving, along with a brochure that describes our mission and financial reality. The mailing asks you to think and pray about raising your pledge, or making one for the first time, and then coming to Grace Church next Sunday ready to do so. *"Give, therefore, to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's,"* said Jesus. Give to the emperor. Give to God. The key word here is "give."

I believe all of us truly want to be generous givers. But none of us live without fear. In order to become generous givers we have to confront our fear. We live in troubled times. People are worried about the economy. We look for security – for a buffer between ourselves and destitution. I think that fear is what’s driving the Occupy Wall Street protests. People on both sides of the police barriers fear that they won’t have enough to stave off want. We look at the world through the eyes of scarcity, fearing that only so many piles of thirty dollars are lying around for the taking. One person’s windfall has to be someone else’s loss in a closed system. So here is the fear that we need to confront: if I pledge to the church this year, or raise my pledge over last year, I may wind up needing it and then I won’t have it. It will be gone. What will I do?

Today’s Old Testament reading from Isaiah (45:1-7) is part of a story about people who lost everything. At one point in their history the Jews suffered utter devastation at the hands of the Babylonians, who rode into Jerusalem, sacked the city, and carried the whole population off into exile. The Jews had nothing. The Babylonians had everything. It was a closed system. But then, into that apparently closed system, God sent the pagan King Cyrus of Persia to rescue the Jews, let them go home, and actually fund the restoration of the Jerusalem Temple. God bless that Cyrus! Out of the blue Cyrus came riding in with more blessings than anyone could have imagined. God gave it all back. God is like that. God has infinite blessings in his quiver. And what are the first words out of the mouths of God’s angels? Fear not! Be not afraid.

A moment ago I mentioned two minor miracles that forever influenced what I believe about giving. The first was finding the \$30.00. The second miracle was that within just few weeks after giving the money away, I received it all back again. At school I won a raffle that was worth a ten dollar shopping spree at a sporting goods store. Then one day back at the good old Grand Union, while my mother was checking out, my brother and I were searching all the discarded grocery bags for Blue Stamps that people overlooked. Do you remember the Green Stamp and Blue Stamp incentives at supermarkets? We were saving them for a new bicycle for me. A woman who apparently wasn’t a collector saw what we were doing; we must have looked like orphan children out of the musical, *Oliver*. She came over and handed me twenty dollars worth of stamps she didn’t want. So there it was: the second miracle. I’d given away \$30.00, and in no time I’d received it all back. Don’t get me wrong: I’m not drawing an absolutely straight line between the first and second miracle. But I did notice the connection. And in retrospect it was my first conscious experience with a divine reality I have found to be true again and again, and have come to trust: you cannot out-give God. When you give something to God, you never lose it. God gives it back. God takes five loaves and two fish, and gives a meal for thousands. God takes Good Friday and gives us Easter Day. God takes ordinary bread and wine, and gives us his living presence. God will take your death and give you eternal life.

Some of you may remember the late Danny Thomas, the comic entertainer and founder of St. Jude’s Hospital for Children. At one point in his life, long before he’d made it big, Danny Thomas was out of work and essentially broke. He and his young wife had a baby on the way. They had to borrow money to buy groceries. Just a week before the baby was due he had seven dollars and eighty five cents to his name. He would later recall, “My despair led me to my first exposure to the powers of faith.” One Sunday morning in Detroit he went to church, and when the offering plate was passed he put in his “usual dollar” – actually quite a lot considering what he had. Then, in a break with the usual order of service, the priest announced a special missions offering, and Danny Thomas wanted to give something. “I got carried away,” he said, “and ended up giving my six more dollars.”

When the service was over the full reality of what he’d done began to hit him. He had only eighty-five cents left in the world. What would he do? He recalls how he walked up to the

altar rail, knelt down and prayed aloud, “Look, I’ve given my last seven bucks. I need it back ten-fold because I’ve got a kid on the way, and I have to pay the hospital bill.” He went home not knowing what to think. He later wrote, “You won’t believe this, but the next morning the phone rang in the rooming hall.” It was a job offer for a part in a commercial. The pay was good: seventy-five dollars. “I nearly dropped the telephone receiver,” he remembered. “First I whooped with joy; then an eerie feeling came over me. The seventy-five dollar fee, unheard of for me at the time, was just over ten-times the amount of money I had donated to the church.” God gave it back, tenfold.

Jesus said, “*Give, therefore, to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s.*” Give to the emperor. Give to God. The key word here is “give.” Be a giving person.

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The story about Danny Thomas is told by Dr. Arthur G. Ferry, Jr. in “Like Parent, Like Child,” 1993.