

Davidson College Presbyterian Church
Davidson, North Carolina
Lib McGregor Simmons, Pastor
"Giving to God The Things That Are (Already) God's"
Genesis 1: 26-27; Matthew 22: 15-22
October 22, 2017

There are some who would say that history has never seen division like we are seeing in our country these days.

Those who say this never met up with the likes of the Herodians and the Pharisees who were as far apart from one another as Fox News and MSNBC are today. The Herodians had no problem with the Roman occupation of Palestine; the Pharisees, on the other hand, were offended at the very thought of paying taxes to this foreign, occupying power. (1)

Yet, here they are in Matthew 22, today's Scripture lesson, locking arms with one another, a phalanx in full riot gear intent on blocking the forward movement of this upstart rabbi named Jesus.

As you hear the story which Matthew tells, listen particularly for the way in which the question that Jesus asks the Herodians and the Pharisees about the image on the face of a coin resonates with the short Old Testament lesson from Genesis 1 which spoke of how humankind is created in God's image.

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This was what Sunday morning looked like in the McGregor household when I was an elementary-age kid.

With four children (the fifth wouldn't be born until I was a teenager) and two parents sharing one bathroom and trying to get ready for Sunday School and for church all at the same time, it was, as I recall, chaos. There would be glasses of spilt milk at the breakfast table, the crisis of missing barrettes for my sister's and my ponytails, and just as we were ready to walk out of the door, someone would discover one of my brothers still in his underwear playing with his Matchbox cars on the floor of his bedroom.

There was, however, one exception to the Sunday morning chaos in our household. One thing that we could count on was this: atop the embroidered dresser scarf on my parents' mahogany dresser, there were four stacks of nickels. 5 nickels for each kid. One nickel was for the offering basket at Sunday School. Two nickels were to seal in an envelope that would be placed in the offering plate that was passed during the worship service just before the sermon. And two nickels were ours to do with as we pleased, which sometimes for me meant buying a popsicle at recess, but more often meant squirreling away my 10 cents in a box on my dresser until I had

accumulated the grand sum of \$1.00 which I then put in my little plastic coin purse and carried to the local toy store, Mel's Kiddieland, where I would purchase another volume in the esteemed literary series, *Cherry Ames, Girl Nurse*. (I kept those 30-odd books until just a month or so ago when I said to them a la Marie Kondo, "You have sparked joy in my life," and put them aside before the moving van arrived.)

This was what happened in the McGregor household on Sunday mornings.

My parents did not literally take a nickel and hold up the coin in front of us in the manner that Jesus did and ask, "Whose image is this?" so that we would respond, "Thomas Jefferson" to which they would respond, "One day you will grow up and have the privilege as an American citizen of paying taxes (and it is a privilege), but remember that your primary identity in this life is not your identity as an American citizen. Your primary identity is that first and foremost, you are a child of God."

And yet, their aim was much the same.

What they did by who they were and in very intentional, hands-on, practical ways was that we were created by a God who loved us even more than they did and that we belonged to God even more than we belonged to them. We were given to know that the true blessings of life, of breath, of body, of soul, of mind, of spirit come to us as undeserved gifts from God. And thus we who bear the image of God in us are granted the high privilege of giving the whole of ourselves, the whole of our lives, back to God.

During the time of year at church, stewardship season, we church leaders often are heard to talk about offering our time, our talents, and our treasures to God, that is, our whole selves to God.

Too often, I fear, the unintentional message that we send is that we are simply talking about offering a part of ourselves and what the most important aspect of stewardship is the giving of our time, our talents, and our treasures *to the church*.

And, yes, this is a part of stewardship, but it is only a part.

Take the currency of time, for instance.

When one is approaching retirement, as I am, then one begins to assess how one has used the really brief amount of time that any of us is granted on this earth.

And one begins to realize that in the context of the theological affirmation that all of our 524,600 minutes times whatever age that you are belongs to God, every question about how we spend our time becomes the way we truly answer the deeply spiritual question, Are we giving to God the things that are already God's?

Moments that we could have used to have an actual face-to-face conversation with a friend or a spouse spent scrolling through a Facebook feed or binge-watching HGTV episodes. Is this the way that we mean to answer, Are we giving to God the things that are already God's?

Time that we could have spent baking a cake or playing a game of HORSE in the driveway with a soon-to-leave-home daughter or son redirected toward cleaning out closets and garages, our "stuff," if you will, which, let's be honest, reduces both the quantity and the quality of human relationship. (2) Is this the way that we mean to answer, Are we giving to God the things that are God's?

And consider the currency of our talents...

The use of our talents in the context of the question, Are we giving to God the things that are already God's involves asking ourselves the question, how do I use the voice that God has given me to speak out when any person who has been created in God's image is violated?

This has become a huge stewardship question for me personally over the course of these past days as story after story of aggressive assault against the bodies and souls of women and girls has come to light. I will confess that I am haunted by the times that I have let a demeaning comment toward women go without challenging it for fear of upsetting someone in one of the four congregations which I have served, the times that I have counseled younger clergywomen to let go of feelings about a particular situation of being dismissed because of one's gender because "it used to be a lot worse," the times, yes, that by my silence, I have made an unjust and unfaithful cultural attitude more acceptable. (3)

I am asking this stewardship question of myself in a big way these days, and I challenge you on this stewardship dedication Sunday to ask it of yourselves. I challenge you to ask it of yourselves because this is not a problem that is going to go away without men and women of faith like you and me raising a collective voice and using our talents to the fullest extent possible so that all people, no matter what their gender identity, can know in the deepest parts of themselves that they are loved and valued and that the very image of God is within them.

And then there is our treasure, our money.

Mike Slaughter is the author of a book entitled *The Christian Wallet*. In the book, he makes the bold statement that our household budgets (not to mention our church budgets) are moral documents. (4)

If we take to heart Jesus's admonition that we are to give to God the things that are already God's, then there are 3 questions, according to Slaughter, that we must ask ourselves each time that we spend money:

Why am I spending?

Whose money is it that I am spending?

What are God's priorities in my spending?

DCPC wants to be a partner with you in answering these questions. One of the things that is very clear is that when one begins to ask and attempt to answer these questions in light of Jesus's words "give to God the things that are God's" is that most of us don't begin with a clean slate. Studies show that the average household with unsecured debt has over \$15,000 in credit-card debt along. Debt may be a very real, an oppressive and emotional presence in your life.

So this stewardship season, I offer you not only the invitation to pledge to the work of the church and invest in the future, but also the invitation to attend the Financial Peace University which will take place here at DCPC beginning in January.

At a Session meeting several months ago, one of our elders did a risky thing and testified personally and with heartfelt honesty regarding how participating in a Financial Peace University and taking the tools learned there and applying them to his family's life had been transformational for their family, had enabled the shackles of debt to be removed from them so that they no longer live in fear of an emergency car repair and so that they have funds which they are able to pledge joyfully to the work of God's church.

It was truly a testimonial to one person's sense of remembering and being blessed anew in acknowledging that all things, including he and his family, belong to God.

Which brings me back to my childhood story.

Today, I am not asking you to give 60% of your income as my parents required me to do! I am asking without apology for you to invest in the work of Davidson College Presbyterian Church by making a pledge for 2017 because what we are all about around here is worshiping, learning, serving, loving, and giving as a testimony to the truth that in all things we belong to God.

1. Susan Pendleton Jones, "Pledging allegiance," *Christian Century*, October 6, 1999, 931.
2. Mike Slaughter, *The Christian Wallet: Spending, Giving, and Living With a Conscience* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2016), 15-16.
3. Shannon J. Kershner, "Our Persistent God," *Journal for Preachers*, Advent 2017, Volume XLI, Number 1, 40-41.
4. Slaughter, 31.