

Sermon – 20th Pentecost
Matthew 22:15-22 7 Isaiah 45:1-7
October 22, 2017

“Give Back or Give To?”

Imagine you were the recipient of a large sum of money – I won't give you a specific figure - just imagine that it's a far larger sum than you have at your disposal right now. For a kid that could be \$10 and for some of you a thousand or a hundred thousand or who knows, even a hundred million! The condition is you can't keep the money. It *all* must be given away – and you alone get determine how that happens. For starters, how would it feel to have been in sudden possession of so large a sum of money – exhilarating? But how would you react to the “fine print” – the stipulation that none of the money is yours to keep? Would exhilaration give way to exasperation at being told “*give it all away!*”? Would you accept the money in the first place if you had to give it away or maybe throw up your hands and say “*I wouldn't even know where to begin?*” Might you conclude you simply couldn't do it? You wouldn't be alone.

But if you thought you could, who would be on the list of recipients and what do you imagine their reaction would be when they got a gift from you far in excess of what you've given in the past? Does that add any motivation or enjoyment to the task for you? Now here's the hard part – maybe. What if it the amount you were asked to give was within your means but it was your own to start with?

Giving is our subject today. Though not a common “stewardship” text, giving has a prominent place in our story from Matthew. What Jesus says about it leaves his listeners astonished – and judging from Jesus' assessment of their motives they did not go away in a good mood! On the one hand, Jesus' answer is sort of a “non-answer.” He doesn't take up the issue of the legitimacy of Romans taxes at all – nor does he offer any sympathy for his questioners - Israelites who like everyone downright hated paying those taxes. Nor does he recommend a good CPA so maybe they can at least “reduce” the amount they owe! Pay up and shut up might not be a bad inference to draw from what our Lord said – at least on the question of taxes.

But in a very real if subtle way, this lesson is an excellent one to use to talk about giving. Jesus says “*give to Caesar the things he has coming and to God the very same.*” The starting point, the absolutely essential starting point I might add for talking in a biblical way about giving is that a steward owns nothing - he or she only manages what has been placed at their disposal. Back to our initial scenario, if you suddenly had an “*out-of-the-blue and out-of-sight*” sum of money to give away, and decided to give it a try you would be a “steward” in that you had control over something that didn't belong to you in the first place.

Jesus swats away the question about taxes because he knows even Caesar doesn't claim to "own" his subjects – but God does. "Give back" to Caesar what he and lots of kings in those days created – coins for running the economy with their image on them. But then Jesus says...to Pharisees who very well knew the implication of what came next..."give to" God what bears his image both inside and out and which God alone created. Moreover, like our initial example about the sum of money – Jesus answer implies all or nothing. Caesar and kings like him had a tax figure in mind – pay it and be done. God has no such sum in mind – that is why when we talk about giving, the only place to start is with the understanding that God is owner and we are managers. How many managers tell owners how much of their own stuff they can have?

Now that we have that part of our lesson on the table, I need to pause for a moment – and say to you all "thank you." You are stewards of God, each of you, and you have again this year made confessions of faith we call offerings in support of the work we do together here at Calvary. If the starting point of being a steward is the acknowledgement that we manage rather than own those things placed at our disposal, then it is incumbent upon us on the staff and council to acknowledge the same. We only manage what you make available to us, and we owe you our gratitude as well as our pledge of being the very best stewards/managers we can be. The chief of all virtues, I have heard it said, is gratitude, so please accept ours today.

Martin Luther once said *"people who have been drawn into the church...share what they have with a trusting heart and a diligent hand...to the glory of God the faithful return nothing but freely and in simplicity show themselves grateful toward the mercy of God."* We are humbly but expectantly asking you to consider your giving a *"duty and delight"* by affirming two important truths. First – God's claim on our lives is total – no reading of our lesson today can lead to another conclusion. Second our righteousness before God is 100% the gift of Jesus. Jesus gave it all - we have no debt, no good works including our giving of which God can say, like Caesar *"here, pay this."* But remember, the chief of all virtues is gratitude, giving is an act of worship and worship above all an expression of gratitude. From the moment we hear in our worship each week... *"in the mercy of almighty God Jesus Christ was given to die for you"*...everything is about gratitude. Giving is everything we do after we say "I believe in a gracious God."

When I tried to work out for myself that scenario I laid out in the beginning I had a really tough time. What do you do when you can do so *much* good and yet you have this gnawing feeling you might not be doing the *most* good? The only way I could solve that gnawing feeling is to either say I'd turn the money down or say *"I got nothing to lose – it was all gift in the first place."* There is a huge difference I concluded between giving away something that was required of me, and giving to a God who loves me and requires only that I accept what he has done for me. There is a huge difference between giving as gratitude versus obligation. Caesars of this world oblige – God blesses. We can't lose that which we can never earn. We can't lose the love of Jesus Christ. Trusting this is most certainly true – we give. AMEN