***Responsibility #4 What Does it Mean to be Intentional About Money?***

*a sermon delivered by the Rev. Scott Dalgarno on Oct. 22, 2023*

*based on Matthew 22:15-22*

God or Caesar. Perhaps one of the reasons why we come to church is to ascertain the relative worth of conflicting values in our lives. That’s one takeaway from this morning’s text. There are those singular moments in life when, in a flash, the value of things comes into focus and we see what is truly important.

I know of a man named Glenn Adsit, who ministered in China some years ago, not a thing for the faint of heart to do. He was put under house arrest for his work, but the Chinese really didn’t want to hold him. They merely wanted to expel him and his family.

So soldiers came one day and said, “You can return to America.” This made his family pretty happy. The soldiers said, “You can take two hundred pounds with you.”

Well, they’d been there for years. Two hundred pounds. They found some scales and pretty soon family arguments began among the two children, the wife, the husband.

“We have to take this antique vase, it may be a thousand years old,” said the wife. “Well, this is a new typewriter,” said Glen, and “What about my books?” “What about these toys, they aren’t heavy?” said the children.

Well they weighed this thing and that thing and, finally, right on the dot, too hundred pounds.

The soldiers came at the appointed time and asked, “Are you ready to go?”

“Yes.”

 “Did you weigh everything?”

“Yes.”

“You weighed the children?”

Silence.

“Weigh the children.”

And in a moment, typewriter, books, the vase and so much else became trash.

In today's Gospel, Jesus is under fire. A dispute breaks out over whether we ought to pay taxes to Caesar. It's curious because Jesus hasn't mentioned anything about taxes in all of his teaching. He has not even mentioned the government directly, as far as we know, but he does speak a lot about justice, or the lack of it in Judea, so his critics come to him, seeking to entrap him in a debate about paying taxes to Caesar.

His critics sense that in Jesus and his teaching, their sovereignty is under dispute, and their power is being questioned. Jesus had a way of doing that, just by the way he talked and the way he walked. Should we serve you or money? Should we follow you, Jesus, or is there some other flag that leads to real freedom?

Today it is, “should we pay taxes or not?” So perhaps their question ought to be rephrased. "Should we *worship* Caesar or not?" After all, that was what the coins proclaimed; that Caesar was a god.

In each major town of Judea, the Romans had placed statues to Caesar that not only proclaimed that Caesar was in power, controlling everything, but that Caesar ought to be worshiped as supreme.

The Jews were terribly angered by this idolatry, but most attempted to get along with the Romans. What's a pinch of incense offered to Caesar, after all?

Others resisted. When, on one occasion, the Romans tried to make a sacrifice to a pagan god at the altar in Jerusalem, the Jews, even though they lacked an army and few means to resist, launched a brave revolution. They were quickly crushed under the heel of Rome. But it demonstrated that the faith of Israel was, in great part, a question of who should be worshiped -- to whom do they owe their greatest allegiance?

So, with that understood, let me put this morning’s text in context. Jesus' critics have been watching his every move. Today, they come with a killer of a question, a trick question.

If Jesus would answer, "Sure, pay the tax. Caesar is powerful and in charge of everything. Pay the tax," then Jesus is in big trouble. He has thereby supported the pagan Roman occupation forces. He would be acting as if Caesar has God-given authority –- this is not a good choice for Jesus.

On the other hand, if Jesus answers, "We're Jews! Don't pay the tax. That money has Tiberius Caesar's idolatrous image on it." -- if Jesus were to answer this way, the nervous Romans will be on Jesus' case immediately.

Interestingly, Jesus doesn't really answer the question about Caesar's coin. He parries with another question. "Whose image is on the coin?"

"George Washington," we reply ("er, Caesar").

"Then give it to him," says Jesus. "But be careful. Don't give to Caesar what belongs to God."

In other words, Jesus doesn't directly answer their question - or even indirectly. And in the process Jesus changes the question.

Remember, this question about tax is from the would-be entrappers, not Jesus.

And when he replies to their question, he asks, "Whose image is on the coin?"

In doing that he is alluding to a verse in the book of Genesis (2:26) where it is said that we are created "in the image of God." We have God's image stamped on us.

See, Jesus is saying, “Sure, the coin belongs to Caesar, it has his picture on it, but **you** belong to God.”

So, look at what Jesus has done here? He has taken a political question and made it a theological one. He is asking, “In whose image are you stamped? Who is the object of your highest devotion? Who owns you?”

When it comes to the question, who or what owns us, money **is** a significant player, because, outside of family, nothing else in the wide world has the potential to control our allegiance as much as money or possessions.

Jesus may not talk about taxes and government very much, but he spends a whole lot of time talking about money, about the rich and poor – he even raises the question with one rich young man about maybe selling everything and giving it all away.

So let me ask, what is your relationship with money, and with what you own? Is it intense? Is it casual? Is it a source of stress, or even obsession?

It comes down to an important question – do our possessions possess us, or do we possess them? One key to finding that out, it seems to me, is whether we *enjoy* the things we have or not.

Some people don’t. Some people only enjoy the acquisition of things. And when they have acquired a thing they go on immediately to figure out what they want to acquire next. We all have some of this in us.

Probably the most amped up example of this, in my lifetime, was the revelation that came in 1986, when the gates of the palace of the Philippine president Ferdinand Marcos were opened and it was discovered that his wife, Imelda, owned 3000 pairs of shoes. Well, it was only 2700.

It was considered the gold standard of “wretched excess” and it may still stand. I mean, how many shoes are enough?

Imelda Marcos seems too easy a target, so I usually find that example just freaky and let it go. But when the subject of shoes comes up I think of another pair of shoes once owned by a late friend of mine named, Emily, whose memorial service I had the privilege of officiating a few years ago.

A few days before that service I sat down with her family as I do when I am preparing such a service.

We were discussing family stories when Emily‘s sister, Priscilla spoke up. She spoke of how, when they were kids (theirs was a big family) they all got new shoes once a year, for the first day of school. One pair, once a year.

This was so huge for them. They hugged them instead of wearing them. They carried their shoes around like a new puppy. They slept with them. They didn’t want them to get old and scuffed too soon.

Well, one year right after getting their new shoes, the kids were playing by some railroad tracks not far from home and Emily decided the best way to make sure her shoes didn’t get old was to bury them. It’s hard to get into the brain of a small child, but that’s what she did. Right by the railroad tracks where they were playing. They were still in the box.

The trouble with burying anything near railroad tracks, of course, is that railroad tracks look the same – for miles. I mean, they look the same everywhere. When she went back to get them, she couldn’t find them, so she had to wear her old ones, all year long.

That story has magic for me. That pair of shoes, that I suppose may still be there in that box underground, become sacred in the retelling – they become the most loved and therefore the most valuable shoes ever stitched together, if you get my drift. Way more than any Imelda Marcos ever wore, or, if not worn, bought.

You know, I’ve said this before, but people are so glib about saying Americans today are materialistic. It’s not true. The truth is that we are not materialistic enough.

If we were truly materialistic, we’d treat our new shoes like Emily and her sisters. We’d kiss them and carry them around and maybe even bury them before we’d wear them.

Today people buy shoes, and like Imelda Marcos, we have so many we seldom wear some of them. We may have shoes we’ve never worn. They don’t mean very much, but they should mean something, and, you know,

if we had just one new pair a year -- they would.

One of my favorite poets is an ancient Japanese Zen master named, Ryokan. He lived alone in a hut at the foot of a mountain. He lived in abject poverty, eating local plants and the rice that neighboring farmers would sometimes give him.

His little hut was empty of possessions; he slept on the floor and spent his days meditating, sitting on a rock.   
  
One evening a thief entered his hut while he was a short distance away. The would-be thief discovered that there was absolutely nothing in the hut to steal.

At this point Ryokan returned from his walk and caught the thief searching the little space. The man was so surprised. Ryokan told him, "You must have come a long way to visit me, and you shouldn't leave empty-handed."  Ryokan looked around the empty room, but he too couldn't find anything to give him, so he took off his undergarment and handed it to the robber.

"Please, take this as a gift," Ryokan said.  
  
The thief was too astonished to say anything, and he took it and slunk away into the cold night. Ryokan sat outside his hut and gazed at the full moon. "Poor fellow," he mused, "I wish I could give him this beautiful moon."

It’s stewardship season, and yes, I’m bringing up this subject in the context of the sermon this morning, and I feel good about the connection because the spirituality of how we deal with our money, whether we possess things or are possessed by them, is something Jesus cared very much about.

And how we approach what we give away is very much a part of that. Are we God’s children or are we the children of what we own is answered, in part, by whether we can part with any of it.

How else do you account for the fact that study after study has shown that wealthy people give a lot less of their money away than people who make a pittance.

I had a friend who had a paper route many years ago. He said that people with next to nothing always paid him when he came to collect every month. The people who most neglected to pay him were the rich. That speaks volumes. There is, of course, the occasional Bill Gates and Warren Buffet, but their brand of philanthropy is in the minority.

My favorite remark about money that comes from someone who had some, is from the boxer, Joe Louis, who once said, “I don’t like money, actually, but it quiets my nerves.” Let’s give him that. He’s right.

As I invite you to make a pledge to the church this year let me make the point that giving is a spiritual discipline that has definite rewards. Giving of your treasure helps you make sense of what you keep, -- it should make you happy with what you have kept for yourself, just as giving a portion of your time in some sort of service makes the time you take for yourself all the more precious in this short life of ours.

Once again, let me say, the problem is not that we are too materialistic, it is that we are not materialistic enough. Think of some object you own that you truly love. Think of Emily’s new shoes.

If we truly cherish these wonderful things we own, we would know who made them, where they came from, what contributes to their quality – we might also care about where they go when we will no longer own them.

What do you value in this world? And what is it you don’t want to live a moment without?

I want to end with one more personal story told by Tony Vic of Clifton, Tennessee.

*My maternal grandfather, Daddy Tom, lived within walking distance of my childhood home. Until he died when I was six, I spent time with him, and my grandmother, Mama Georgia, just about every day. Mama Georgia was always sewing, and making clothes and quilts. She even made a small quilt for Daddy Tom to put behind his back in his leather chair, which is where I would find him when he wasn’t in the garden or his wood shop. Seated comfortably, he would pick up his pipe from the big green ashtray on the side table, pack it with cherry flavored tobacco, and light up.*

*Fragrant smoke would curl from his mouth each time he took a puff. Daddy Tom would never let me try his pipe, though I begged him, but he did give me a small corncob pipe so I could pretend.*

*One day Daddy Tom, put his lit pipe in the ash-tray to go answer the door, and I sneaked a puff. I immediately began coughing so hard that I dropped the burning pipe onto the quilt Mama Georgia had made. By the time Daddy Tom had returned a big hole was burned in the fabric, and I was crying at the realization of what I had done.*

*When Mama Georgia came in to see what all the commotion was about, Daddy Tom apologized for ruining the quilt. “My clumsy hands aren’t what they used to be,” he said, and he hugged her tight. She smiled and told him not to worry about it.*

*My last memory of Daddy Tom is of standing on my tiptoes at his funeral to get my nose close enough to the coffin to smell the sweet tobacco scent of his suit. Folded beside his body was the quilt with the hole burned in it.*

*Years later, while snapping fresh beans from the garden with Mama Georgia, I brought up that quilt and began to confess what had happened. She stopped me and said she knew Daddy Tom had been covering for me that day. She said, “Whenever I tried to take that quilt and fix it or replace it, he wouldn’t let me.” He didn’t want to give it up, even for a little while. So she buried him with it in the ground.* Amen