

Sermon
St. Mary Nanoose Bay
October 22, 2017
Matthew 22:15-22

How many do you think of Jesus' parables refer to money? About half! Why would he refer to money so often? I think we need to spend time wondering why because so much of the church's focus these days is on money - on the declining number of people in the pews and therefore, the declining income for the institution.

We aren't going to think our way out of this dilemma rationally. The church isn't a business as many people like to think.

The church is the body of Christ, a living, breathing, mystical body and until we get clear in our heads what our needs are as this body, and bring those needs to God, we aren't going to grow or thrive.

Our way out of this apparent dilemma is offered to us in Scripture. Jesus challenges us to look at our attitudes and practices around money because as a resource that ultimately reflects the abundance of God, we need to learn how to trust and to share. We aren't going to build the future by hoarding and protecting our individual pieces of what we perceive as a limited pie.

In today's reading, Jesus speaks plainly to those who want to trap him. Those representing the Roman occupiers along with the religious elite of the day spend their students, or disciples, to try and trap Jesus. They just can't get that he is divine and operating in a different paradigm; that he is not about gaining power for himself,

and that if he is seen as a threat to them, it's because he is challenging their integrity.

They ask, "Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?"

This would be like asking someone, "When did you stop beating your spouse?" There is no way to answer that does not indict oneself.

If Jesus had answered "yes," he would have been seen to be supporting or colluding with the occupying forces. If Jesus had said "no," he would have been suspected of having revolutionary sentiments and been accused of sedition.

But as was his way, Jesus answered by challenging the lack of integrity behind their question. He asks someone to bring forth a coin. They bring him a Roman coin, a denarius - the coin of the occupying realm. This coin had the face of the emperor on it, portrayed as a God.

He asks them, "Whose head is this, and whose title?" and they answer, "The emperor's." So he tells them, "Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's." Fair enough. But then he continues, "... and to God, the things that are God's," which puts the challenge firmly in place.

What *isn't* of God's? What on earth isn't made from God's abundance? What possibility can we think of that is truly our own? Our very being is a gift from God!

Of course we need laws to organize ourselves but when we forget what it is, or who it is, we are organizing for and around, we lose track of the divine exchange which has nothing to do with a hoarding resources and power for a select few.

This is why Jesus talks about money so much. Because we think the system we have created is the real system of exchange, when it really is a poor and inequitable system in comparison to the divine one.

We know we are being challenged to view the economy from a different perspective when we're troubled by such parables as the one where the landlord pays the workers equal pay when they've each laboured for vastly different amounts of time. We're troubled when we hear of the servants who were entrusted by a landowner with his wealth and the one who went out and invested the talents/money was rewarded with much more; and the one who fearfully hid away the money in order to be safe, was given nothing. We're troubled when Jesus sends his disciples out, saying – "Take nothing with you; depend on the hospitality of strangers." It upsets us when Jesus tells us about the farmer who has a bumper crop and builds more barns to hoard it away, only to die the next day. And it is right for us to be troubled and to wrestle with these stories, because the divine economy is so different from what we know and imagine.

I've had tastes and insights into this divine economy. The one that operates in such a way that a mirror does. Do you remember the demonstration I did over a year ago? (Show mirror – hold hands out and open; then fold them across your chest.) "What does the mirror reflection show back to you?"

One experience I had really opened my eyes and gave me a glimpse of this other form of economy. For about a decade, I had a

business called *Authentic Communication*. I gave talks and workshops on Nonviolent Communication to parents, teachers, couples, volunteers, etc. Most of my business came through word of mouth. One night I had a call from a woman who had gathered together ten friends who wanted to learn from me. She asked, "What do you charge?" I replied, "\$150.00 for a 2 hour talk." She gasped, "We can only afford \$30," and after a moment, she continued, "Would you still consider coming?" Like many people, this woman had no idea what goes into preparing a talk - my preparation time, travel time, costs for handouts, and presentation time. I decided to take a leap of faith. "Tell you what," I said, "I won't charge your group anything. But would you allow me to ask for a free will offering at the end?" She readily agreed.

A few weeks later, I drove up to a home in one of the wealthiest neighbourhoods in Victoria. I gave the group of women gathered my best for two hours, and at the end I said, "This is how I make my living. If you received something you value tonight, would you consider offering me something I would value?" and I passed around the hat. I didn't pay attention to what was happening as people continued to talk and laugh and engage me with questions. I didn't count the money until I got home - \$220.00 - much more than I had asked for in the first place!

I learned a lesson that night. If I give freely, I receive freely. No tension around money; no distraction from the joy of what I do and the joy people feel in return. When we focus on money, we miss the

point. The participants gave what they were able or moved to contribute.

But that's not always the case. Often, because of our obsession around money, and power, we don't, in fact, value what is freely given. Just look at the world around us. We are willing to defile nature for our own advantage, because it's "free" and we're focused on accumulation of wealth.

So the point I'm making here isn't to tell you to give away all your money. (Although that might be the most freeing thing for the right person! Think of St. Francis!) No, the point is to look at where you're constricted around money. Because Jesus is telling us that God wants us to be free. To not be constricted. To engage in life freely, sharing what we've been given because when we do, we enter into a whole new realm of exchange that doesn't make sense within our economic system here on earth.

Money is one of the main ways we constrict, and our constriction and fear make life miserable for others, and for ourselves.

When I was a commissioner on the Gaming Commission for the province, back in the 90's, I used to travel around the province to visit the various gambling sites. At that time, 10% of the casino income, and 25% of the bingo income went to charity. I used to watch people mesmerized by the machines, callers, and lights divest themselves of copious amounts of money that I guessed they would never contribute to those in need directly.

Would they be willing to take even a percentage of the money they put into slot machines and offer to help out the children of their neighbours whose father was recovering from a workplace accident and would probably never work again?

Giving brings joy. I can only imagine the joy God experiences when we freely share the bounty God has given us. And giving can only happen in relationship. Even if it's at a distance, like the coins we give to Tumaini and Precious Jewels at the end of each service, we can imagine the pleasure and relief those who receive must experience.

Money is a resource that is meant to be shared. Not because we are worthy. *None* of us are worthy. *All* of us are worthy because we were created by God. And we were created to live in community – to share our gifts and talents and resources. To engage in, and enjoy, the exchange of all our gifts. Money is just one resource. But it is a tricky one. Tied up with power.

We need to get clear about our view and experience of money. So that we can be free. In order to share our money as freely as we do our gifts, time and talents.

And the result will be amazing. *This how they will know us, as Christians, by how we love each other,* and share what God has given us.

And paired with this money stumbling block is the JOY bit. What gives you joy? This might be the hint as to how you might best share what it is that God has created in you. What gives you joy. Not necessarily what you're good at, because that changes, and you can

always learn new things, but what is it that brings you *joy*? Because when you share from your Joy place, you bring Joy to the world. And then the giving and receiving become a free flowing exchange. This is the divine exchange. And we are called to live in this vibrant, dynamic exchange as Christians. Jesus is there – in the interchange and interconnection of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit! *Amen.*