

WHAT DO WE OWE GOD?  
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Imagine a news conference. The up and coming young politician from the countryside is making the established power base nervous. So they plant a couple of their people as reporters to ask a question that is sure to get the young man in trouble. For no matter how he answers he will offend a significant portion of the voters. This is exactly what the Pharisee's with the help of the Herodians do in today's passage. The subject of paying taxes then as today arouses strong feeling.

We don't know for certain who the Herodians are, but probably represent those who support the government that is controlled by Rome. They would be in favor of paying taxes and would view an answer against paying as a sign of treason and reason for execution.

Remember there was a horrific rebellion around 6-7 AD over taxes. This was a very harsh expensive system for an impoverished colony. By the time Matthew is writing there has been a second revolt that led to the destruction of the temple in the mid to late 60s.

The Pharisees of course have issues with paying the taxes not so much because of the tax, but because of the coin that was used. The coin has emperor's image on it probably Tiberius a wicked and terrible emperor. Words would have referred to him as a god. This tax had to be paid with Roman money. Because of the image and inscription, the coin was a violation of both the first and second commandments.

Jesus however changes the subject and forces the question what belongs to God or what do we owe God? This is the real essence of the story for Matthew. Harken back to the parable a couple of weeks ago about the vineyard and the wicked tenants who do not give God (the vineyard owner) what God was due.

In answer to the question what is the greatest commandment Jesus replies to love God with all your heart, and with all your soul and with all your mind and the second is to love your neighbor as yourself. We owe God our total devotion. Remember Jesus tells the rich man to sell all he has and give it to the poor. The 10% tithe of the Jewish law is peanuts compared to what Jesus tells us we owe to God.

There is towards the end of the Rite 1 prayer of consecration, a very clear statement that is unfortunately lost in Rite 2. "And here we offer and present unto thee O Lord, our selves, our souls and bodies, to be a reasonable, holy, and living sacrifice unto thee." We are not offering just some of us, but all of our being. We are giving back to God what is his, which is all of us, not just 10%.

This is a key concept to stewardship. I am not just talking about how we balance the church's budget, but how we balance our spiritual budget. Budgets are theological statements about what is important in our lives and involve more than money. This is not just something to be examined during a fall stewardship campaign, but demands constant re-examination throughout the year. Being good stewards of God's gifts mean that we acknowledge all that we have is God's, given to us to care for and use in his service.

"Ascribe to the Lord the honor due his name bring offerings and come into his courts" is the offertory phrase that is in our psalm and we use almost every week. In Advent and Lent when we do not sing a doxology or at the 8:15 service we say, "All things come from thee oh Lord, and of thine own have we given thee." If God created all things then all of what we have and what we are is from God and belongs to God.

Stewardship you see is more than just money. Money is what the Finance committee worries about and yes it is important. Stewardship is how do we care for what God has given us. Stewardship is what goes on all year long.

Stewardship is also about cultivating an attitude of gratitude. Stewardship is about cultivating a culture of abundance rather than a culture of scarcity. Overall we at St. Aidan's do a pretty good job of living this out. You have always been a generous congregation.

That said the culture of scarcity is certainly on display in our world and in our country. Look at all the ads for brokerage houses and investment funds that focus on will you have enough money. They play on fear that we will run out of money, yet these ads are targeted at those who already have the most. Prudent financial planning is also good stewardship, but this attitude has consequences when taken too far. Prudent financial planning also allows us to make a planned gift to those charities that we want to support in death as well as in life.

I went to the fall convocation at Virginia Seminary earlier this month and we heard a fantastic presentation by an ethicist and theologian from the University of Virginia. His two lectures are on the VTS website if you would care to view them. The statistic he gave illustrates this. Over the last 5 years the average giving to charities by those families making less than \$100,000 a year has increased by 5%. At the same time nationwide the charitable giving by those families making more than \$200,000 a year decreased by 5%. In between those figures is a small drop or no change at all.

This means that in America those with the least are giving more. They are viewing the world as one of more abundance than those with the most. I have found in my visits to Central America and into disaster areas like the Gulfcoast that they have been some of the most generous people I have met. Christianity views the world as one of abundance, an abundance that ultimately does come from God. Jesus taught a theology of abundance. Think in terms of the loaves and fishes, open tables and abundant Grace. Overall this congregation does a pretty good job of viewing and responding with an

attitude of gratitude and theology of abundance. This is what the parable of the rich young man is about.

What does an attitude of gratitude and a cheerful giver look like? Let me tell you a story about a member of Wendy's parish. As most of you know she has a very interesting congregation with on an average Sunday of 25% being adult men with intellectual disabilities. A couple weeks ago Wendy was setting the altar while the collection was being taken. The usher who does the collection is a young child of about 6 or 7 who takes the plate to each person. Now you have to put something in or he will just stand there and look at you until you place something in the plate.

All of a sudden one of the men starts to cry and call out. Wendy looks up and sees another of the men pointing at the one who is crying and yelling "Him, him." The first man had a dollar bill in his hand and was frantically waving it. Turns out the usher had missed him and he had not been able to put his dollar in the plate. As soon as the plate came back to him, he beamed a great smile as he placed his dollar in the plate.

Now I suspect that since he is on Medicaid and social security, he may only have \$45 or so a month extra after his living expenses are paid. Yet it is vitally important to him to put his dollar in the plate. When you stop and think about that, his dollar is truly a tithe and it matters to him. Out of his scarce resources he gives abundantly. What it would be like to have a congregation full of people who cried if the plate passed them by. Think about that for a moment. When was the last time you cried because the offering plate passed you by?

Ignatius wrote a prayer that I would like to use to conclude this sermon. It expresses what I believe and obviously Ignatius believes is the essence of an attitude of abundance and gratitude.

Take Lord, and receive  
all my liberty, my memory,  
my understanding, and my entire will,  
all that I have and possess.  
You have given all to me.  
To You, O Lord, I return it.  
All is Yours,  
dispose of it wholly  
according to Your will.  
Give me Your love and Your grace,  
for this is sufficient for me.

*A Prayer of St. Ignatius Loyola*