

Year A, Proper 24  
Matthew 22:15-22  
St. Andrew's Episcopal Church  
Oct. 19, 2008  
The Rev. John Spicer

## **Your Money *and* Your Life**

*(The sermon began with a stewardship witness from Steve Rock, encouraging people to support our ministry with children and youth, especially by getting personally involved.)*

Thank you, Steve, for that reminder about the importance of children's and youth ministry, as well as the challenge to put the spiritual well-being of our kids first, both as individuals and as a congregation.

What I heard Steve saying about setting priorities in the church's life certainly applies to our own lives as stewards, too. It's a message we hear loud and clear in the Gospel reading this morning, as Jesus once again silences the religious authorities who seek to silence him. This reading is so powerful, I think, because it's so stark: "Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and give to God the things that are God's" (Matthew 22:21). And what, exactly, does that *not* include? As a seminary professor of mine once said, "You know, God doesn't just want your money. God wants your whole life."

So, "Your money *and* your life," Jesus tells us. What do we do with that? Unless we all renounce the world and go off to live in a monastic community, how do we respond to that call – and how in the world could it be Good News for us?

I think God's claim on our lives means that we're called to live in a heavenward direction. And that absolutely includes how we use our money. Now, God knows that we all have huge obligations that we often struggle to meet: debts and deadlines and demands from all sides. Those obligations can feel like they consume us – at least that's how it sometimes feels to me. But living in a heavenward direction means that, even in the midst of all our "have to's," we can take comfort in knowing that those demands are *not* all there is. As followers of Christ, our lives are not simply about meeting a never-ending list of obligations about time and work and money. As followers of Christ, our lives are about leaning into the Kingdom of God – getting ourselves ready for eternal life by practicing the life of the kingdom *right now*.

And that has a direct relation to how we use our money because our money is a sign, even a sacrament, of the direction we're leaning in our life as a whole. As that great theologian Margaret Heckendorn said in a meeting at church earlier this week, "How we spend our money tells us what our spiritual life is like." She nailed it. The reason God asks us to give back 10 percent of our wealth is not because God needs it, or even because the Church needs it. God tells us to give that money back so that, when we're tempted to lean on ourselves and believe that *we're* the source of our stability and well-being, we'll be reminded instead that, at the end of the day, God is the only source of

stability and well-being we can rely on. As we've seen so clearly in our nation's economy over the past few weeks, everything else can and does slip away; and when that happens, we can find ourselves leaning dangerously in the wrong direction.

Challenging as this may be, it *is* Good News for us because, as Jesus says so many times in the Gospels, our wealth is the thing most likely to keep us out of the heavenly kingdom. That's hard to hear, but it's true. If we see our money and ourselves as the source of our long-term security, we'll end up with nothing *but* our money and ourselves for the *very* long term – and I think we're looking forward to a slightly more heavenly eternity than that. If we're willing to give away just 10 percent of our wealth, it's a sign that we're ready to move into the kingdom – a sign that our lives are leaning in the right direction. But if we're intent on clinging to our wealth, then we don't have our hands free to grab onto the heavenly train as it pulls out of the station. And God is enough of a gentleman to respect our decision *not* to climb on board for the journey into eternal life, if that's the choice we make.

But this call to place our hope on God rather than ourselves is also Good News for us *right now*. It's the Good News of liberation – liberation from what the poet W.H. Auden called “the Kingdom of Anxiety.”<sup>1</sup> There's so much in our lives that causes us worry and fear: Will I hang onto my job and be able to pay my mortgage and my other debts? Will I have anything left to help my kids go to college? Will my 401k be enough to get me through my retirement? These are all very real anxieties, and I wouldn't for a minute insult you by saying, “Don't worry; be happy.”

But I have found something telling about all this in my own life. As you know, one doesn't go into ordained ministry for the money. But because of the way this congregation cares for its clergy, I earn more at the moment than I ever have (which isn't saying all that much, frankly; but it's true). And yet, Ann and I *still* feel like we struggle to pay down our debt, and provide what the kids need, and get the cars repaired, and pay the doctor bills, and on and on and on. My point is that no matter what my salary is, it will *never* free me from the anxieties of life in this culture. It will never be enough, because there's always more we think we “need.” It's a game I can never win.

The only way to win is to choose a different game with different rules and different outcomes. The only way to win is to make the kingdom of God the goal toward which we're striving; and the way we achieve that is by *giving away* more and more, rather than accumulating more and more. I am disappointed in myself to say that I do not yet tithe from my income. But I am, at least, moving toward giving away 10 percent. So, in the face of all the anxieties about the economy and our finances, Ann and I have increased our pledge for 2009. This may not seem like much of a big deal. But I see it as a tiny act of liberation. When the wolves of financial crisis and misplaced priorities surround us, giving money away is our deliverance from being consumed by our own consumption.

And a similar dynamic is true for our life together as a faith community. Using our money for children's and youth ministries is a sign of this same heavenward orientation that Jesus is talking about in the Gospel reading. It's a sign of liberation from the kingdom of anxiety that surrounds this church, because the temptation in an anxious

time is always to cut back and argue that we “can’t afford” this or that. Ministry with kids might seem like a tempting place to cut because, frankly, there isn’t much of a direct payoff from these ministries for those who mostly foot the bill.

But still, God calls us to provide richly for our children’s spiritual lives because it shows that our priority is moving into God’s kingdom. It’s a reminder that our life as a faith community is *not* all about the moment in which we’re living and, fundamentally, not all about us. Instead, supporting children and youth is a sign, a sacrament, of living in a heavenward direction.

And maybe even more, in this present moment, supporting children and youth is a sign that we choose *not* to dwell in the kingdom of anxiety. It’s an act of liberation. It’s an act of faith. It’s an act of giving to God the things that are God’s by giving to God our selves. Remember, God doesn’t just want our money. God wants our lives. And that’s the best news we’ll ever get.

1. Auden, W.H. “He is the way.” In: *The Hymnal 1982*. New York: Church Hymnal Corp., 1985. 463, 464.