**IS ANYTHING REALLY CAESAR’S?**

A dialogical stewardship sermon for Sunday, October 22, 2017

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Chris: Hey Rachel.

Rachel: Hey Chris.

Chris: You know what I think would be really fun on October 22nd?

Rachel: What?

Chris: If we *both* gave the sermon.

Rachel: Both gave the sermon?

Chris: Yeah. You know, it’s an interesting Gospel story that seems easy at first but actually raises some really hard questions about money, loyalty and stewardship. I thought maybe we’d *both* have something to say about it.

Rachel: Oh, I get it. You mean, it’s hard and you want my help!

Chris: That’s more or less how this idea for a dialogical sermon began. And over the past two weeks we’ve had three or four conversations about what today’s Gospel opens up for us.

Rachel: We started by trying to unpack Jesus’ famous teaching at the end: “Give to Caesar what is Caesar’s and to God what is God’s.” Seems pretty easy right? Not only does it translate into our English language with elegant grammar, it also translates into our American culture as a kind of first century affirmation of “the separation of church and state”. It’s easy. Jesus wants us to pay our taxes to the state and pledge to the Church. Got it. Done.

Chris: But that’s not at all what Jesus meant. As a 1st century Jew he hardly would have believed in the separation of church and state.

Rachel: And besides, there was no church yet when Jesus was alive…

Chris: Exactly. That’s why this passage is deceptive to our 21st century ears. You know what Jesus would have believed in as a 1st century Jew?

Rachel: What?

Chris: Loyalty to God. And that’s what this passage is all about – revealing one’s true loyalties: not just in words, but in actions.

In today’s story, the Pharisees are trying to trap Jesus, to get him to pick a side in an ongoing debate about loyalty to God between two factions of Jews. On the one side are the Herodians who support the Roman’s colonial ruler Herod and think that faithful Jews should pay taxes to the Emperor. On the other side are the Pharisees who believe that paying taxes to the emperor who has colonized God’s people violates God’s Law and makes Jews impure. The Pharisees actually don’t care who Jesus sides with. They either want Jesus to admit that faithful Jews SHOULDN’T pay the Roman tax because it would anger the Herodians, or they want Jesus to admit that faithful Jews SHOULD pay the Roman tax because it would anger their disciples. Either way Jesus answers, one group will turn against him.

Rachel: But how does it help us understand the meaning of the “Give to Caesar” bit?

Chris: It all has to do with those Roman coins. Roman coins were considered unclean according to the Law because the inscription on them was blasphemous (it said that Caesar, whose picture was there, was a God).  No Pharisee, who labored hard to be loyal to God’s law, would ever touch such a blasphemous image. So when Jesus asks the disciples of the Pharisees to produce the Roman coin, and they do it (in the Temple courts no less!), they are immediately revealed to be hypocrites. Their actions do not align with their professed values. Their secret complicity in paying the tax compromises their loyalty to God. And so Jesus’ response: “Give to Caesar what is Caesar’s and to God’s what is God’s” is not an argument for separate spheres of church and state, but rather is a something of a challenge, a reminder that God longs for our loyalty in all aspects of our lives.

Rachel: I have been really surprised at my reaction as we have teased out this thread of loyalty to God within this passage.  Normally, the word “loyalty” is a word that leads me to close off…It brings up the elderly, finger-wagging woman in my childhood congregation who guarded the coffee hour breads and clearly felt that the “faith” that my youth group friends and I had developed was just that—air quotes “faith”—not hard-core enough—not loyal enough to some strict set of expectations and rules.  “Loyalty” felt to me like a word that only comes up if you *haven’t* been loyal—like its whole purpose is to reveal our insufficiency.

Chris: Sure…but then as we explored loyalty to God as the theme of this passage, something shifted for you and you seemed to really connect to it.

Rachel: I did!  One of the things that I have loved about our conversations this week is that prior to them, I had experienced loyalty as emblematic of all in the church that was limiting and admonishing—yet after our wrestling with how to articulate what we were both coming to understand as liberating in this passage, it was really the best word!

Chris: That is an experience I have so very frequently when spending significant time with the Bible—enough time to really dig in—something that I once experienced as threatening or limiting is transformed into something life-giving.

Rachel: It does seem counter-intuitive that God’s desire for our complete loyalty would actually be freeing, except that it is.

Chris: Yes!  Right! Talk about how, because it took us a good deal of exploration to figure that out—we sensed it was authentically true before we actually understood it.

Rachel: Indeed!  We did come to understand it, though.  For me, I got it when you were talking about how this passage might inform stewardship, particularly budgeting. Budgeting and spending can be a stressful thing—there is so often a feeling of scarcity about it even when there is money to give away, because it is never as much as we would like to give away or rarely enough to give to all of the different things we really care about.

I’ve always thought of my and David’s financial resources in two buckets—one is the bucket of stuff that makes life go or makes life more comfortable, but doesn’t help anyone—groceries, rent, insurance, car payments, phone bills, internet costs, sneakers, soccer uniforms, afterschool care, more books than I can read, or clothes than I need.  That bucket is HUGE—it is by far the bulk of our expenditures.  The other is the bucket that’s for doing Good work—I may have even thought of it as for doing “god’s work”—charity donations and my st. Paul’s pledge. That bucket, in relation to the first bucket, is TINY.  The bucket that actually makes a difference in the world is TINY.

Chris: That’s not a good feeling, is it?

Rachel: No. But then you posed a guiding question that was initially terrifying, but ultimately reframed things in a whole new way. You asked, “What if there is no Me Bucket and God Bucket. What if God actually wants everything? What if in God’s eyes, everything we have is meant to glorify God?”

Chris: It was terrifying for me too, when I said it out loud. But it is really the foundation of Christian Stewardship. God doesn’t just want the part of us that’s left over, whether it’s after work or after taxes. God wants our whole loyalty. That means everything…and it changes everything!

Rachel: Exactly. When I look at it this way, lots of things in the first bucket help me be loyal to God. Groceries and rent—those are related to my commitment to nourish myself, a child of God, and those other children of God who are in my care—David, Simon, Kate.  Car payments enable us to get all over the place—to nourish relationships with family and friends which builds up love and care in the world…and to enable me to get out here, where I feel so very called by God to God’s work.  Soccer uniforms are my commitment to Simon and Kate’s pure joy and growing confidence in their bodies, rather than just their minds.

That question you posed has made me see so very clearly that the bucket that is doing God’s work is actually far LARGER than the bucket that isn’t…and now, too, I can see clearly what is actually IN the bucket that isn’t doing God’s work—the too many new clothes and the latest tech gadgets.  I feel much freer to scale back on those now that I see where God is in all that I financially commit to.

Chris: I see fewer iced lattes in my future. But the irony is, I feel good about that possibility. The real good news in all of this is the reminder that much of what we seemingly do out of obligation may actually be very deeply aligned with our commitment to God.

Rachel: Yes—and seeing that clearly liberates us to experience those commitments as faith-deepening, rather than as devoid of meaning or purpose.

Chris: And that is really the true work of Stewardship: coming to appreciate a broad view of how our actions and our spending reflects our loyalty to God (or, in some cases, doesn’t). Stewardship is far more than just about increasing our pledge to the church each year to try and get to 10%; it’s about increasing our pledge to God until *that* reaches 100%…of our time, our talent, our treasure. Until all of who we are and what we have is going towards building up the wholeness of the church, the wholeness of our families, the wholeness of our communities, or the wholeness of our earth. In this season of Stewardship, as we look at our budgets and our pledge cards and our world, may we find a sense of freedom in remembering that God longs for every part of our lives to be an offering.