

Pentecost 20

Sermon 10.18.20

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Spoiler's alert. I'm going to talk about money today. The denarius in the Gospel may have been a giveaway. Or the season – once you've been around St. David's for a while, you pick up the fact that we get the stewardship campaign rolling about now. Yep, money. I know it's an uncomfortable subject, and I can imagine some of you squirming in your seats right now. It's ok. I can't see you, so squirm away.

Last month, I had an epiphany. An epiphany in the season of Pentecost.

I was standing right down there when my voice gave out. That may not seem like a great big deal, but it's never happened to me before, and certainly not as I stood in front of a camera singing. Blame it on spending too much time in the hazardous air quality that assailed us that week in the NW. Blame it on too many high Ds and Es in the music. Blame it on my overestimation of what I could do, my puffed up belief about my worth.

I blamed it on God. He. Took. My. Voice. Away.

And yet. My voice is God's to begin with. It is not about my own self-aggrandizement. It is about the glory of God.

Our Gospel story of Jesus and the Pharisees is a classic set-up. You can almost see a presidential debate or a media moment as this drama plays out:

1. The Pharisees want to "catch" Jesus. But they are sly and don't want to get their hands dirty, so they send their disciples, their messengers, rather than show their faces.
2. They spend a good bit of time thinking up the perfect question to which there is no right answer. In today's parlance, it's "When did you stop beating your wife?"
3. They try to soften up Jesus. Kind of like the Police Benevolent Society whose representatives call just when you're sitting down to dinner. No, you don't know me, so why are you chatting with me like I'm your best friend?
4. Having set the stage, these good folks pose the question they think will snare Jesus. "Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?"

If I'm Jesus' campaign manager, I'm squirming in my seat right now! Oh, boy, they've got him in a corner, how's he gonna get out of this one?

In Public Relations-speak, we say "the truth doesn't make a bad story." And in his response, Jesus lays the profound truth on the line, neatly slipping the snare like the best politician and at the same time rendering his opponents toothless. He calls them out: "You hypocrites!" because despite the fact that the Torah forbade them to possess graven images, there they were, in the temple, no less, with coins that honored the emperor. Oops. Busted.

"Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's."

Way back in the first chapter of Genesis we are told that we are made in God's image. Give to God the things that are God's."

In First Chronicles, chapter 29, verse 14 we read the famous words from David: "But who am I, and what is my people, that we should be able to make this freewill offering? For all things come from you, and of your own have we given you." And later, in verse 16, he says: "O Lord our God, all this abundance that we have provided for building you a house for your holy name comes from your hand and is all your own." David's riches are detailed in the Bible, yet he

reminds us all that the clothes in his closet, the money in his stores, the jewels, the livestock, the time, talent and treasure gifted to his people...ALL of it comes from Him. All of it.

This is a tough concept here in the United States, where we honor those who pull themselves up by their bootstraps and make something of themselves. We are a nation of entrepreneurs. We went west, braved the frontier, conquered the elements. And the people who lived here first.

Our culture is chock full of stories of people who have beaten the odds, who have, oh thank heavens, assimilated into our middle class, capitalistic society, so much so that we believe we've *earned* the coins we have in our pockets. We are lulled into thinking that it's all about us. Our talent, our brains, our athleticism, our beauty.

That belief system conveniently forgets the millions, yes millions, of children who are growing up in generational poverty, who know nothing but the culture they were born to. That "fight your way to the top" mentality doesn't work out for so many of our neighbors. The system conquers them, instead of the other way around.

God has blessed each of us with many comforts. He has blessed us with unique talents. And whether you're pushing a lawnmower or making coffee, whether you are writing a Sunday bulletin or a newsletter article, whether you are cooking food for those without, or whether you have been without and bring first-hand understanding of our neighbors, whether you're folding clothes for the Bargain Faire or whether you're thinking of the next ministry for St. David's. All things come from God. Give to God the things that are God's.

Here's one example: Father Steve is taking a couple of much-deserved weeks off. We've committed to opening the church on Wednesday mornings for parishioners and community members to come, sit, and pray. I'm reminded of Jesus' plea to his disciples in the Garden of Gethsemane: "Could you not stay awake with me one hour?" If you're available for a morning this Wednesday to serve God in this ministry, give Cheri Ratay a call. I'm sure she'd appreciate your help.

In the coming week, we'll be sending out letters and pledge cards, asking all parishioners to pledge in our annual stewardship drive. Yes, we do it so we can keep the lights on. Yes, we do it so we can pay the priest. These are all practical things, but the real point here is that we do have abundance, just as David did. And it all belongs to God. So let's talk about what we can do with this abundance – together. Let us do His work in the world. I'm not asking for what you can spare. I'm asking you to give to God all that belongs to Him.

My epiphany, the one I started to share at the beginning of today's ramble? It's this. God doesn't want my voice. He wants me, whether or not I have a voice. And I needed to be reminded that he's not looking for the trappings. He's asking for my heart. My soul. Me. Give to God the things that are God's.

Amen.