

<i>Date Preached</i>	18-Oct-2020	<i>Date Initiated</i>	05-Oct-2020
<i>Where Preached</i>	SAK	<i>Appointed Readings</i>	Yr A, Pr 24 (Tr 2)
<i>Main Text</i>			

" Then he said to them, 'Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's.' When they heard this, they were amazed "



Is it lawful to pay ... ? It is the trick question of inquisitors bent on wrangling from Jesus an answer they can use against Him: either to brand Him as a religious heretic, for placing duties to Caesar above duties to God; or a civil insurrectionist, for urging people not to pay the Roman taxes. Jesus will not be drawn in, of course. His neatly parrying their thrust only increases His inquisitors' enmity toward Him only ... and thus, we draw another step closer, in the wider arc of St Matthew's Gospel, to the Cross and the Empty Tomb.

But we must also pay attention to the *specifics* of Jesus' response to the Pharisees, for as He sidesteps their attempt to entrap and entangle Him, He says something profound about our relationship with money ... more specifically, about the three-way relationship among our money, our selves and God. Elsewhere in Scripture Jesus teaches that the Sabbath is a gift from God for human rest and refreshment ... and *also* an opportunity to demonstrate our love for God in how we use the Sabbath to show love for those in need. Several times in the Gospels Jesus teaches that how we relate to our possessions is a critical aspect of our relationship with God: Do they control us? Do we allow them to serve as a ... as *the* ... measure of our self-worth? Or do we see and use them as a means to a greater end: the end of God; as support for our journey of faith and as resources for helping others?

And so, too, today, with the question of money. In His "render to Caesar" / "render to God" response, Jesus' point is that *all* of our money ultimately originates from and exists by and under the grace of God. How we use, accumulate and dispose of it is not a test of our purity or the worthiness of our faith, but *is* an opportunity to acknowledge God's dominion, return God's love and serve God's purposes on earth.

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We are in stewardship season here at St Andrew's, and hopefully all of you have received your 2021 pledge cards in the mail, and many of you have already returned them. (Thank you!) The practice of stewarding our money is a form of rendering back to God what is already God's.

As we learned from the parable of the wicked tenants in the vineyard two weeks ago, all we commonly say we "have" or we "own" actually belongs to God, for Whom we hold it in trust and seek to cultivate it—to make it fruitful. And cultivation is probably where I begin thinking about stewardship and pledging, for they entail much the same planning, caring, husbanding and harvesting as farming does ... in order for us to deliver, from the resources God gives us, a fixed portion for God and God's work, in and through the church. It is the elements of discernment and intent that set pledging and stewardship apart from a spur-of-the-moment donation or reaching into our purse or pocket as the plate comes around.

But, as always with money, the question comes down to: *how much?* How do I decide how much to give? Is there a norm? Is there a giving level that's right for me, as public radio stations are so fond of saying? Take comfort: I am not going to preach about tithing—literally, giving one-tenth to the church ... or about any *other* level of giving or way of calculating exactly how much to pledge. That is a matter for each of us to consider through prayer and reflection, in openness to the guidance of the Holy Spirit. But I will briefly trace four different approaches—practical, theological and spiritual—to stewardship ... to pledging ... that may help place this season and this discipline in a broader Christian perspective.

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The first approach is purely *practical*. There is no denying the fact that a parish like ours is, among many other things, a business, albeit a non-profit one. It has a physical plant to maintain, staff members to pay, lights to keep burning, equipment to repair and a host of other expenses. We could approach pledging merely as a way to help defray St Andrew's operating expenses. There is a certain earthly logic to this, and, to be sure, God *gladly* receives any gifts so given. I'd like to suggest, however, some other approaches that more consciously take into consideration the church's unique identity as the Body of Christ and not just another human enterprise. For the ends our parish serves and the work it carries out are God's and not our own.

A second approach to stewardship is *missional*. For a long time it was common in Christian circles to talk about the mission of the Church (capital C). But over the last 20 or 25 years, theologians have come to realize that the *real* author of our mission in this world is not the church or any individuals within it, but God alone. We exist as a body to discern, decide and do what it is God is calling us **to**, in this time and this place. And the money we pledge enables this body to answer and carry out God's plan. The distinction between the practical cost-defrayal approach and this missional approach may be subtle, but it is crucial: The practical approach looks primarily toward invoices, balance sheets and bank statements ... and sees them as a burden we must bear. In contrast, the missional approach draws our hearts toward the love God lavishes upon this world—saving, caring, comforting—and we *respond* to that love ... we join in this mission of God ... with our contributions. Missional pledging is helping the work of God get done; meeting the cost of that work is secondary.

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I might, however, suggest two additional approaches to pledging that can carry our decision-making even more deeply into the love and plan of God. One is the ancient idea of '*first fruits*': of dedicating and sacrificing to God the first—and, hence, the best—portion of what God blesses us with. The Israelites had an annual cycle of festivals in which the first produce of various crops and the first-born of various domestic animals were sacrificed to God. The act of giving over to God the first portion of God's bounty expressed the Israelites' awareness that all is, ultimately, from and of God; and it thanked God for God's providence; and it also blessed the balance of the crops and herds that *remained* in their possession. A first-fruits approach to pledging, then, is a two-fold act of worship: When we write our weekly or monthly check to the parish, we consecrate—dedicate to God—the money we are sacrificing to God's use, *and* God blesses the balance that remains for us to use and enjoy.

The final approach to stewardship I'll suggest is a *spiritual* one: the perhaps counterintuitive joy of electing to *have less*. Consciously reducing or regulating our consumption of

a good tends to increase our appreciation of the good that remains available to us. Thus, reading a great book a chapter at a time ... or watching only one or two episodes of a show on Netflix in one sitting, rather than binge watching the entire season ... allows us time to reflect, to savor, to anticipate. The accustomed—even habitual—pleasure we give up for Lent is, at least in my own experience least, that much *more* satisfying when we enjoy it only on Sunday, instead of every day of the week.

A spiritual approach to pledging—exploring the joy of *having less*—is giving to the Church generously enough that we actually *notice* ... in our lives, our bank accounts ... what we're giving; not, of course, giving to the point of poverty or privation, but noticeably. The small absence we feel focuses us, gratefully and reflectively, on the God-given bounty that remains for us to enjoy ... and thence, to the blessedness we live in as Christ's own. When we choose to have even a *little* less than we could, our lives are turned all the more toward the infinite abundance of Christ.

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In the end, stewardship is not about dollars or percentages or budgets, for that all tends toward the practical—just keeping the lights on. Rather, I suggest that what Jesus is *really* teaching us to render to God, with our monetary gifts, is our hearts and our wills. To pledge as participation in the glorious mission of God in this world. To joyfully dedicate to God the first and best part of all we have, with thanksgiving. To give enough to notice the outflow, because what flows *back* to us is a richer, deeper relationship with Christ. When we come to approach stewardship as neither a cost nor an obligation but as a field in which to cultivate our faith, the harvest never fails to be ample beyond measure.



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