

JOHNS CREEK UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

Promises To Build On: Giving

Matthew 22:15-22

Sunday, October 22, 2023

Rev. Max Vincent, Senior Pastor

Today, we continue our stewardship emphasis: *Promises to Build On*. We are looking at how we can build on the promises we each make when we join Johns Creek UMC to support the church with our prayers, presence, gifts, service, and witness. This morning, we are focusing on how we support the church through our gifts.

This week, I have been thinking about how my giving to the church has changed over the years. When I was a child, the primary way I supported the church was by using my talents and abilities, my gifts, to support the church by participating in children's choirs and pageants or plays that the children and youth offered to the church. I could see how my gifts contributed to the church because members would thank us for how our singing contributed to worship or how some play or pageant brought a scripture story to life for them.

As I got older, my parents gave me money to contribute to the offering. When I started to earn an allowance, they encouraged me to give a portion of my money to support the church. When I got a job and earned income, they reminded me to support the church through my financial gifts. I still used my gifts and talents to help support the church, but financial support became a part of living out my promise to support the mission and ministry of the church. However, when I put money in the offering plate, it wasn't always as easy to see how my gifts supported the church. So, my parents would share stories about ministries that the church was able to carry out because of our financial gifts. They talked about how a portion of my offering, combined with gifts from others, paid the utilities at the church. They reminded me that our church supported mission work in our community and around the world. I was connected to those ministries through my giving.

One of the first congregations I served as a full-time pastor had a practice that reminded me of how each of our gifts support the whole ministry of the church. This church had a tradition of inviting different members to

bake bread for communion. On communion Sundays, the person who baked the bread would follow the ushers up the aisle as we sang the doxology. The ushers would hold up the offering plates with our financial gifts, while the person who baked the bread would come forward and put the bread on the altar. After the doxology, we would pray over the bread. God would bless it. The baker was invited to help serve communion. Each time we did this, I watched as this person witnessed how God blessed the gift they offered and then used to it to bless that congregation, including the person who brought the bread. That image of communion became a model for me of what it means to support the church with our gifts.

That same year, my first year as a full-time pastor, I learned that my financial giving had decreased. The amount I was giving had more than doubled from the year before, but the percentage of my income that I was giving to the church had decreased. It was when I was working on our taxes that year that it struck me. As I looked at all I had paid in taxes, I was surprised at the amount. When I calculated that amount as a percentage of my income, it caused me to go back and look at how much I gave to the church. While the dollar amount had doubled over the previous year, my income had more than doubled. It's not often you'll hear a testimony about how paying taxes caused somebody to increase their giving to the church, but there it is.

I thought of that lesson, because our second scripture reading today contains a story about some religious leaders who come to Jesus with a question about whether or not it is right to pay taxes, and Jesus very quickly turns the question to what we owe God. The story is found in Matthew 22:15-22:

¹⁵ Then the Pharisees went and plotted to entrap him in what he said. ¹⁶ So they sent their disciples to him, along with the Herodians, saying, "Teacher, we know that you are sincere, and teach the way of God in accordance with truth, and show deference to no one,

for you do not regard people with partiality. ¹⁷ Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar or not?" ¹⁸ But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, "Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites? ¹⁹ Show me the coin used for the tax." And they brought him a denarius. ²⁰ Then he said to them, "Whose head is this and whose title?" ²¹ They answered, "Caesar's." Then he said to them, "Give therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's." ²² When they heard this, they were amazed, and they left him and went away.

I know that there is often a lot of anxiety whenever we start talking about money in the church. People often tell me we shouldn't preach about money. It will only drive people away. Then, I realized one day how much the New Testament talks about money. Most of Paul's letters talk at some point about supporting the church through giving. Paul often thanks congregations for the way they support Paul and his traveling companions in their work of spreading the gospel. The letter we read from last week, Philippians, is mainly a thank you note from Paul for a gift the Philippians sent to support Paul. In our first scripture reading this morning from I Thessalonians, Paul thanks the church for their gifts to support the mission to expand the church. Most of Paul's letters also mention an offering he is gathering for the church back in Jerusalem.

As Paul began his missionary work, the church in Jerusalem was suffering. There was a drought in the land. The early Christians were more vulnerable because they were ostracized by their family and friends due to their commitment to Christ. So, they did not have much support in this time of crisis. As Paul went to new places and started churches, he reminded them that because of their common commitment to Christ, churches in Greece and Galatia were united with Christians in Jerusalem, so they should gather money to help support the Christians there. One of the reasons I love being a part of the United Methodist Church is that part of our giving goes to support the work of the church in Africa, Asia, and Europe through our connections around the world.

In the text from Matthew, some religious leaders come to Jesus and want to trap him with a question about paying taxes to the emperor. When they ask

whether it is legal to pay taxes to Caesar, they mean legal according to the teachings of the scriptures. Remember, Rome is a foreign occupying power. These are not free citizens paying to support their elected officials. These are subjects paying taxes that support the occupying army. The coin used to pay this tax was a Roman denarius. This coin had the image of Caesar Augustus on it and proclaimed Augustus as divine. Many Jews saw this as idolatry and protested the tax because of it. If, Jesus says not to pay the tax, he is guilty of teaching against the law of the Romans. If Jesus says pay the tax, many of his fellow Jews might accuse him of supporting idolatry.

Jesus asks them to show him one of these coins used to pay the tax. He asks, "Whose image is that on the coin?" They say, "Caesar's." Jesus says, "If Caesar cares so much about that stuff that he has to put his picture on it, let him have it. But you give to God what belongs to God."

Going back to the very beginning of our scriptures, we remember that when creating humans, God said, "Let's make them in our image." Jesus is reminding us that we are God's coins in the world. We bear the image of God. Likewise, all that we have and all that we are is God's. Jesus turns this question about taxes into one about how we are bearing God's image in the world. This is at the heart of what we mean by stewardship, understanding that what we have has been entrusted to us by God, and we are to steward that in ways that we participate in God's work in the world.

One way we live that promise out is through supporting the church with our gifts. A part of that is the way we use our talents and abilities to participate in the ministries of the church. But another part is also how we support the church with our financial gifts. It just takes money to do the work of ministry. The church doesn't get a discount on electricity. The church pays the same amount for office supplies as you do when you go to the store.

Our Stewardship Committee has set a goal of raising our giving by 10% in the coming year. Honestly, a lot of that cost is just catching up with inflation over recent years. But to support our continued growth, we also need more supplies, and that takes money. Our average

attendance is up by about 80 people over this time last year. That means printing more bulletins. Because of the growth in our children's ministry, we hope to add some staff support for Tiffany in the coming year.

These and many other considerations went into creating that 10% target.

We would love for each family to prayerfully consider raising their financial giving by 10% next year. We also realize that some people will not be able to do that. But some may be able to give more than 10%. Part of that 10% goal includes trying to increase our number of pledging units from 300 to around 330. We can't all do the same thing, but we have a part to play. That's how we support the church together.

This takes me back to communion as a model for how our giving supports the mission of the church. About five years ago, another church reminded me through an act of communion of how it takes each part to fulfill our mission.

When we moved to Inman Park in Atlanta, we had an entertainment center in our living room where we displayed our communion sets. The entertainment center had a stand for a TV and two tall shelves on either side. Above the area where the TV went, there was a bridge connecting the top of the two shelves. On that bridge, we would display most of my communion sets.

These communion sets were all gifts marking different moments in our lives. One was given to me when I was ordained. Two had been used in our wedding. One was from a church member who was a potter.

As I was leaving my office a few days after we moved to Inman Park, Kristen called me and was so upset that she could hardly speak. I went home, still not sure what had happened. When I got home, I learned that Kristen's mother had been setting out those communion sets on the entertainment center. She had set several in place and was on the ladder about to put one of the last pieces on that bridge when the bridge came loose on one side. She dropped the piece in her hand and tried to catch the bridge. It was so heavy that she could not steady it, and she watched as slowly different pieces slid off the shelf. It took Kristen a few minutes to get into the room and help her mother. Eventually, the shelf came completely crashing down on the TV, and nearly every communion set had at least one piece that was in pieces.

I shared that story with the staff at the church a few days later. About a week after that, two staff members spent an afternoon helping Kristen glue pieces of those communion sets back together. All of them have been used in some way to help serve communion again.

When we left the church at Inman Park, the church gave us a new communion set that they had commissioned for us. Every time I use one of those communion sets, I am reminded of how the gifts that others gave to me are being used to continue offering God's gifts to others.

Thanks be to God.



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