

Wesley United Methodist Church

October 25, 2015

“What Side Are You On?”

Matthew 22:15-22

A little boy was in church one Sunday Morning with his grandmother. Everything went well until it was time for the offering. The grandmother began to frantically search through her purse, but she couldn't find her offering envelope. Apparently she had left it at home. It was a most embarrassing moment for her as she kept looking through her purse for something to put into the collection plate. Her grandson sensed the dilemma. The little boy had a solution for her problem. “Here, Gramma,” he told her, “you take my quarter and put it in, and I'll hide under the seat.”

Children learn from watching adults. That is how they determine what is important in life. Wayne Barrett, a nationally recognized leader in the field of Christian stewardship, says that the first time he ever saw a fifty-dollar bill was in a church offering plate. This was years ago when fifty dollars was worth much more than it is now. Seeing that fifty-dollar bill in the offering plate, spoke louder to him than any words. He saw firsthand how important the church was to his parents and the other adults in their congregation by the gifts they gave. It wasn't that these folks were wealthy. They were not, they were committed. Seeing fifty-dollar bills, twenty-and-ten dollar bills in the offering plate taught young Wayne a lesson he would remember for the rest of his life.

The church he grew up in didn't use offering envelopes. Wayne says that there is teaching value in letting children see what their elders are contributing to the church of Jesus Christ. He also said that it's much easier to give them a quarter and send them on their way.

The Pharisees were once again plotting against Jesus. They had a question for him. They were trying to trap him into saying something that would discredit him. They wanted to silence him and make him look bad in front of the crowd. Being the hypocrites that they were, they baited their trap with a compliment.

“Teacher, we know that you're sincere,” one of them said, “and teach the way of God in accordance with truth.” Say, what? They didn't believe that for a minute, but they wanted the people listening to think they were giving Jesus a fair chance.

Then they asked him a loaded question. “Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar or not?” Uh-Oh. If Jesus says it's all right to pay taxes to the Roman government, then he will lose face with the majority of his audience. For the pious Jews it was offensive to pay taxes to the hated Romans.

On the other hand, if Jesus says it's wrong to pay taxes, then he will be in trouble with the Romans. It's a no-win situation. Jesus knew the Pharisees were trying to trap him. Fortunately he was wiser than they. He asks, “Show me the coin used for the tax.”

One of the Pharisees produces a Roman coin from his pocket. Little did the Pharisee realize that in even possessing a Roman coin he already was well on the way to losing an argument. The Jewish people found the inscription on Roman coins offensive, “Tiberius Caesar, Son of the Divine Augustus, Pontifex Maximus.” To the pious Jew, the inscription on the Roman coin was a deliberate break with the Ten Commandments which prohibit “graven images.” For these and other reasons the Jewish people did not use Roman coins. They had their own temple currency. In producing a Roman coin the Pharisee showed which side he was on.

And that's true for us as well. “Where a person's treasure is, there is his heart also.” Where we spend our money and our time is what we really care about.

A pastor greeted persons at the door following a stewardship sermon in which he discussed pledging. A disgruntled member asked accusingly, “Where in the Bible do you find anything about pledging?” Like many of us this man was uncomfortable being challenged to pledge to his church. Instead of being defensive about his sermon the pastor answered good-naturedly, “That's a good question. Let's get together over lunch and talk about it this week.” The gentleman agreed; a time and place were set. Later

that week the two of them did get together for lunch. After they had ordered, the pastor brought up the subject.

"You know, your question was a good one." The pastor said the question forced him to do some thinking. "The Bible is full of references to pledging," he told the reluctant church member. But the member remained unconvinced. "Come on now, Pastor," he said. He knew that sometimes pastors have a way of exaggerating. The pastor told him that he looked up the word, "pledge" in a Bible dictionary and he found words that pertain to pledging: "Commit, promise, dedicate, devote, covenant, vow" – all very familiar Bible words. That made the man think more about stewardship. His pastor explained, "Christian stewardship is merely a reflection of our spiritual commitment to Christ. Stewardship is, first of all, our response to God."

How we use our money shows which side we're on. Jesus exposed the hypocrites. They said one thing, but their lives said the opposite. Jesus takes the coin and asks, "Whose head is on this, and whose title?" Without a moment's thought the Pharisees answer, "Caesar's." Quietly Jesus says, "Give to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's."

When an emperor came to power he would immediately have coins minted with his name and portrait on it. That would signify that the coins belonged to him. In his answer Jesus said that since the coins already belong to the emperor, give them back to him. Give back to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and give to God what belongs to God.

Jesus outwitted the Pharisees at their own game. After he told them, "Give therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's." The Pharisees were speechless. They had no more questions for him. Matthew tells us, "they were amazed. So they left him and went away."

Jesus wanted the Pharisees to consider what was really important—their allegiance to God. The same is true for us today. We get caught up in all kinds of activities, but we need to continually ask ourselves, "what is most important in my life? What do I really care about?" When we answer those two questions, it will show in our stewardship of all life—including our material possessions.