

*“The Denarius and the Big Picture”*

Sermon for First Christian Church of Decatur, Georgia

Season of Pentecost, Sunday, October 19, 2014

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Holy Scriptures: Matthew 22: 15-22

<sup>15</sup> Then the Pharisees went and plotted to entrap him in what he said. <sup>16</sup> 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. <sup>17</sup> Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?” <sup>18</sup> But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, “Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites? <sup>19</sup> Show me the coin used for the tax.” And they brought him a denarius. <sup>20</sup> Then he said to them, “Whose head is this, and whose title?” <sup>21</sup> They answered, “The emperor’s.” 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.” <sup>22</sup> When they heard this, they were amazed; and they left him and went away.

Sermon

When Huey Long was Governor of Louisiana,

he traveled across the state preaching his share the wealth plan.

He was out in the bayou one hot afternoon at a town crossroads.

When a crowd gathered from the farms and diner and country store,

he began to deliver his populist message.

He wanted folks to know that he believed the common family

was being plundered by the organized wealthy interests in the state.

Looking out into the crowd he saw a man he knew.

*“Brother Jones,”* said Huey Long, *“if you had three Cadillacs,*

*wouldn’t you give up one of them so we could gather up the children*

*and take them to school during the week and to church on Sunday?”*

Brother Jones said, *“Sure I would.”*

*“And if you had \$3 million, wouldn’t you give up just one million  
so we could put a roof over somebody’s head  
and make sure folks had decent food to eat?”*

“Sure I would,” agreed Brother Jones.

Huey Long was on a roll now. *“And if you three hogs...”*

*“Now hold on a minute,”* interrupted Brother Jones, *“I’ve got three hogs.”*

Now hold on a minute; you’ve quit preaching and done got to meddling!

Hold on a minute ‘cause you are getting personal.

That, too often, is the limit,

regardless of whether you are progressive, moderate, or conservative,  
consider yourself amongst the haves, have-nots,  
or the have-some, want-some-mores.

It is what we do with what we’ve got

that reveals our personal priorities  
regardless of whether we have it or not.

It is what we do with what we have to offer

– our lives, our resources, our time and talent and treasure,  
our incredible capacity to love and to be loved in return –  
what we do with the offerings of our lives  
that reveals our priorities, reveals our faith, and reveals our future.

It is how we love with the love we have to offer

that reveals our deepest sense of Self,  
that will determine the quality of our life on earth  
and be the final grade upon our reception  
in Heaven when our days on earth are done.

Our story starts in the temple of God.

Once again the Holy Scriptures

open our eyes and hearts and imaginations

to envision ourselves with Jesus Christ in the Temple in Jerusalem.

This is the same temple where Jesus stayed behind when he was 12,

visiting with the elders and awing them with his questions.

This is the temple where, 21 years later,

Jesus and his disciples approached on the eve of Passover,

immediately after arriving in Jerusalem

to a festive celebration of branches and Hosannas.

This time, however, the chief priests and elders

were not so happy with his return.

Upon entering the temple of God

Jesus drove out all who bought and sold in the temple,

and he overturned the tables of the moneychangers

and scattered those who sold pigeons.

He quoted Isaiah 56, "*My house shall be a joyful house of prayer.*"

And from Jeremiah 7, saying, "*but you make it a den of robbers.*"

In the temple, while the moneychangers fled from his wrath at injustice,

the blind and the lame approached Jesus for healing,

and he healed them.

The people cried out, "*Hosanna to the Son of David!*"

The chief priests were indignant at the healing

and scowled at the joyful response.

Suddenly -- with Jesus now present and a new Spirit of Joy –  
the temple had become a joyful house of prayer!  
Jesus called the words of the children of God, “*perfect praise.*”  
He promptly left the temple,  
and did not return until the next day.

The next morning the people in the temple discovered that Jesus had come back.  
This time Jesus the Rabbi, the Teacher,  
set about teaching and proclaiming  
the Good News of the love of God.  
Once again, as they had done so the day before,  
the chief priests and elders approached him, interrupting his lessons,  
and asked him questions about his authority.

Bless their hearts –  
*(We’ve observed that here in the South if you say, “Bless her heart.”  
you have permission to say anything you want about anybody.)*  
Bless their hearts, the Pharisees have sworn allegiance to the Lord,  
yet their loyalty is limited to the law  
for they have neglected the Spirit of God.

They know the rules and regulations  
but appear to not know the Spirit that inspires and empowers.  
Bless our hearts, my friends,  
if and when we see the law but miss the Spirit.

Sometimes we get so focused on being right  
that we forget or neglect or reject the Holy Spirit.  
I wonder if this is akin to believing that the Law of Moses

gives us permission to do violence in the name of God?

I wonder if this is akin to American Christians

who see homeless children of God yet call them “illegals”?

I wonder if this is akin to the Tennessee congregation

that recently beat and cast out a young couple for being gay?

I wonder if this is about the bold high school student body here in Georgia

that voted for a transgender classmate to be Homecoming Court?

Courage comes in many shapes and colors and communities,

and Jesus showed us how to stand up with courage

to the principalities and powers.

So here we see the Pharisees attempt to trick

the young rabbi teaching in the temple of God.

Jesus deflected their obvious attempt to entrap him,

and deftly turned the tables.

He spoke to them in parables.

*“When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard his parables,*

*they realized that he was speaking about them.*

*They wanted to arrest him,*

*but they feared the crowds,*

*because they regarded him as a prophet.” (Matthew 21: 45-46)*

*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...”*

This could have been the first Halloween trick or treat

except that it was during Passover.

They start the conversation with a compliment.

They offer a disingenuous comment, a treat meant to butter up

the same one they seek to trick,

slick, empty words that seek to hide their true intent.

*They say, "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 the emperor, or not?"*

Before we go any further, let us be perfectly frank and up front.

Their question is no more about taxes

or being a law-abiding citizen

or the separation of church and state

than it is about whether the moon is made of cheese.

*"The Pharisees and other religious scholars more often than not*

*would ask Jesus technical questions that served no real purpose.*

*Their intent was to trap Jesus. In making him choose a side*

*they hoped to prove or disprove that he was the Messiah.*

*Focusing on the minutiae diverts our energy*

*from seeing the bigger picture."* (Jason Gottman, [The Journal of Worship Resources](#), Pentecost II, 2008 Issue, p. 23)

Strictly focusing on the minutiae and negating the mission

takes the edge off the power of the Christ we have within,

a mighty Spirit strong enough to save us and save the world.

The disciples of the Pharisees and the Herodians

have the same Holy Spirit of God within themselves  
as Jesus Christ and you and me,  
yet they choose to use that power, that force of love,  
that divine gift of divinity,  
to entrap, overshadow, and control God  
rather than to live into being the image of God  
in the midst of the human community.

Recorded history testifies that there is a longstanding religious tradition

that in the temple of God  
it is not permissible to show a coin with a graven image,  
which is why the money changers and pigeon sellers  
were just outside the temple gate.

Even if Jesus had a coin, he would not have pulled it out,

because anyone who did so would break Jewish law.

The Ten Commandments are clear:

*“Thou shalt have no other gods before me.*

*Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image...” (Exodus 20: 3-4)*

Once again the tables were turned.

*18 Jesus, aware of their malice, said to them,*

*“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.*

You can imagine the congregation gasping at their faux pas,

maybe even laughing and pointing,

saying to one another, *“Can you believe these guys?”*

*20 Then [Jesus] said to them, “Whose head is this, and whose title?”*

*21 They answered, “The emperor’s.”*

*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.”*

Separation of church and state,

to pay or not to pay taxes,

these are mere tools they use or, should we say,

abuse and misuse in their discourse with God.

We may be fools for Christ, but Jesus is no fool.

God is wise to the ways of humanity.

Who made who? Who is the Creator here?

How many of us have thought we were fooling our parents,

when they knew all along which way was up and what we were up to?

Dare I say that our Savior doesn’t worry about the little details of our life.

Jesus is concerned about the bigger matters,

like forgiveness and salvation,

like reconciliation and redemption,

like being love and sharing grace upon grace,

like faithful stewardship

and building the Domain of God on  
earth.



When it comes to our personal priorities and stewardship,  
we have much to learn from Jesus' example and courage.

*“Being a good steward is being one who sees the bigger picture  
than paying church bills and fulfilling church budget obligations.  
Good stewardship is committed to sacrificial giving out of abundance.  
It is seeing that more than enough is available for all by the grace of God,  
and it is placing the needs of others above your own.”*

(Cameron Douglas, Pastor, First Christian Church, Decatur, AL)

A simple, honest and faithful way to determine  
our own practice of faithful stewardship  
is to dedicate our first work hours of the week to God.  
In those first two, three or four hours of your work week  
dedicate everything you do,  
everything you are,  
every relationship you encounter,  
and everything you earn to God.

Give to God your first earnings, your first efforts,  
your first gifts of labor and service,  
and you will quickly discover  
how amazing and profound the rest of your week will roll.

Like the Herodians before us, we sometimes get distracted  
by the small and insignificant  
and lose sight of the glory of God.

The effect is nothing less that disastrous.

We can see the disastrous impact of pettiness in our family relationships,

in our work relationships, and in the political arena.

Let's keep our eyes on the prize.

You see, a unified church, an engaging church, a permission-giving church,  
a faithful, fun-filled, lively experiment of God  
must not be distracted from its purpose.

The Bible says, "*When they heard this, they were amazed;  
and they left Jesus and went away.*"

Well, not everybody went away.

Some stayed around for the feast.

Some stayed for the Last Supper in the Upper Room.

Some stayed because they believed,  
or wanted to believe,  
or once believed,  
or hoped to believe one day  
that this, indeed, is the Messiah.

Some stayed because the Messiah had done got to meddling,  
and the whole people of God done got the message.

*All power be to the Creator, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen!*

## Communion Invitation

“When we come to the Lord’s Table,

we are meant to see the bigger picture of God’s love and sacrifice.

This meal represents a welcome table

that is set for all who confess that Jesus is Lord and Savior.

It is also set for those who want to meet Jesus, even for the first time,

and discover for themselves the goodness of God.

Jesus invites us all in, saints and sinners alike,

and then uses this meal to bring us together.

Our Savior doesn’t worry about the little details of our life.

Jesus is concerned about the bigger matters,

like forgiveness and salvation, like reconciliation and redemption,

like being love and sharing grace upon grace,

that are offered in this Bread of Life and Cup of the New Covenant.”

The Table is set. Come to the feast, and know that the Lord is God.

(Paraphrased from Jason Gottman, The Journal of Worship Resources,  
Pentecost II, 2008 Issue, p. 23)