

“Treasure Trove”

Sermon – October 22, 2023 Stone Presbyterian Church

For years when our granddaughters here in Clinton came to visit and Grandma (my wife) was babysitting, they would ask her, “Nana, can we go up to the attic?”

We live in a 110-year-old farmhouse with a standup attic the length and width of the house. And since nature abhors a vacuum, we have managed to have it completely filled for decades despite my wife’s efforts otherwise. The many—many—things stored are too eclectic to categorize, but some are items from when our children were children in case their children could use them.

So, Nana would take the girls up and inevitably they would bring down a stuffed animal or toy or shiny Christmas tree garland beads to play with. And when their cousins from out west came, they would ask, “Nana, can we go up to the attic and show them the treasures?” And up they all went.

For our granddaughters the attic was a treasure trove of riches. But exactly what is a “treasure trove”? Well, today we use it to mean “a rich source of a thing”, particularly when it is something to explore, like our attic. Or a synonym dictionary, which is a “treasury of words”, or in Latin, “thesaurus verborum” or now just “thesaurus.”

The word “trove” came through Anglo-French meaning “found”. So, a “treasure trove” is literally “treasure found” and legally referred to gold (mostly) that had been hidden by one person but later found by someone else after the original owner was gone and unidentifiable, leading to that asserted legal phrase, “finders keepers, losers weepers.”

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Today’s scripture passages offer a treasure trove for insight into the word of God. We cannot mine all the veins of interpretation, but there are a few nuggets worth exploring.

The most obvious one in today’s lectionary is the gospel lesson. For context it takes place Tuesday of Holy Week and the Pharisees are looking for a way to trap Jesus in his words. Today we would call it “gotcha journalism.”

They decide to pit religion against politics (who would do that?) and to raise the stakes they have the Herodians go with their disciples. Now the Pharisees were highly religious Jews who opposed the empire while the Herodians were Jewish people who supported emperor-installed King Herod. But both wanted to get rid of that gadfly from Nazareth, so it was “the enemy of my enemy is my friend.”

So, they go to Jesus and after some flattery to further underscore that Jesus must speak the truth, the Pharisees’ disciples ask him, “Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, the emperor, or not?”

This is in reference to a flat-rate census tax that ever any adult had to pay annually and the amount was a denarius, which was about day’s wage for a laborer. We might think of it as \$100 bill. That may not sound like much, but it was just one of many taxes and was a burden particularly on the poor, which was the vast majority of the people who were living hand to mouth. By way of reference, there are many people who get arraigned in court today that can’t make bail for even \$100 nor have any family or friends who can help them out.

Of course, the horns of the dilemma are that if Jesus says that it is lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, he alienates the people (including his

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followers) who hate the Roman occupation and its Caesar. If he says it is unlawful to pay taxes, the people will be pleased, but Jesus will then be liable for arrest by the Romans, thanks to the Herodians. It’s black and white and for Jesus an apparent lose-lose situation.

But Jesus knows their hypocrisy—the fact that the Pharisees and Herodians came together would have tipped him off.

So, he reframes the issue subtly by asking to see the coin used to pay the tax, which they readily do. Note that while Jesus is the one being put on the spot, in reality it is his questioners who are more deeply entangled with, and complicit in, the exploitative economics of empire. Jesus’ pockets are empty, but his “religious” opponents have no trouble supplying a denarius on demand.

He asks, “Whose likeness and inscription is this?” They say, “Caesar’s.”

Then Jesus responds with that verse that has penetrated even secular consciousness, “Render therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s.” (using the old Revised Standard Version translation).

“[And] when they heard it, they marveled; and they left him and went away.”

At first blush you might think that Jesus is saying “separation of church and state”, if you will. Live a secular life and religious life in parallel. Like the Pharisees (ironically), though Jesus believes everything is God’s. So his declaration is more of a challenge: *you* have to decide what is God’s and how. An “all-or-nothing” worldview is naïve.

Jesus pushes people to think for themselves and determine what is best for them when they engage in the world. He seems to say:

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“Take a stand yourself. It’s your decision by which you can prove what kind of person you are.”

If you are sincere about how to respond to God’s grace and love, you must be bold and loyal to their interpretation. In other words, you must bear the fruit of your interpretation. If you do not do what you believe or decide, it is a form of hypocrisy.

Jesus calls his challengers hypocrites because they were amazed by his answer but then simply left him and went away without further engagement or words of change or commitment. They had no interest in learning or changing or even defending their interpretation. They just wanted to take someone down who threatened their position; God was never involved—it was all politics and a power play for these “religious” leaders.

Choices in life are rarely binary: black or white, right or wrong, secular or sacred.

For the goal of life is not merely to defeat “the empire” or adopt an “all-or-nothing” policy but to love people, including enemies, strive after God’s kingdom and righteousness, and live in hope between now and the future.

Until the end, we must continue to pursue the way of God progressively, radically, and authentically. That is, your values, ideals, and actions align. And that you are humble enough to know you are not perfect. You’re honest with yourself and with others; you take responsibility for your mistakes and work to correct them, not excuse them.

For we must always remind ourselves to whom do we belong. It is God who claims us, who made us in his own image. We do not belong to

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anything or to anyone else. We don't even belong to ourselves. We belong to God in all our being, with all our talents, interests, time, and wealth.

The consequences of belonging to God are remarkable. First, it means that God will not forsake us, just like he did not forsake the Israelites even after they forsook God with the golden calf.

It also means we are not to forsake those in need around us. Take a look at any person. Whose inscription is on them? Each is made in the image of God and so we give to them as each is God's also.

Second, because we belong to God, we belong to the people of God, the body of Christ. We are baptized into this fellowship and can only lose our membership by turning our backs on God. Alienation and division are our doing, not God's.

Third, belonging to God means that we give to God that which belongs to God's: that is, we give ourselves. We take the sacred trust and invest it in our lives of worship, privately, publicly (like here on Sundays), and in our daily work and service. All of this is worship. Ultimately, giving ourselves to God means that we give ourselves to the world.

We have a treasure trove of blessings from God and in Jesus Christ as our savior. And like my grandchildren going to our attic, I exhort you to be excited and curious about what you might find as you seek, like the Thessalonians, the treasures that come from “your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.”

In the name of God the Creator, God the Redeemer, and God the Sustainer.
Amen.