

St. Andrew's Sermons
The Rev. John D. Rohrs
18 Pent A; October 16, 2011
Gospel: Matthew 22:15-22

Sacramental Money

If you have not yet heard, I need to tell you that Norfolk is occupied. About a week ago, a few hearty souls pitched tents in front of the Bank of America building, and in the process they joined many thousands more who have occupied financial districts in New York and across the country. It's a movement that continues to grow, and you can look at it with bemusement or with admiration, but I don't think you can ignore it.

These protests are real. They're spreading because people are frustrated and worried: high unemployment, mounting deficits, an ever-increasing divide between the rich and poor. And the common denominator, the thing that ties all of these concerns together, is money – the lack of it, the excess of it, the right or wrong use of it...it's all about money.

Of course, this is nothing new. Two thousand years ago, the Pharisees had a plan to trap Jesus in a debate about money: "Tell us what you think," they said. "Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?" If the answer was yes, they surmised, Jesus would be condoning the idolatrous use of the emperor's face on a coin. If no, he'd be breaking the law. What they should have realized is that Jesus never answers yes or no. "Give the emperor what is the emperor's," he said, "and give to God what is God's."

Now a common way to understand this response is to think Jesus is separating out the religious from the economic, as though money has nothing to do with faith, and vice versa. But when I read this story along with the rest of the gospel, I wonder if Jesus meant just the opposite. The truth is, he talked about money all the time, which makes me think that maybe he was being ironic, as if to say, "The emperor can have this coin, but remember that everything comes from God."

If that's the case, if that's what he really meant, then I think it's a good lesson for us today. If we want to break through the partisan gridlock and find some meaningful solutions to our economic problems it seems to me that we ought to confront the root question: What do we believe about money? What does it

symbolize? What is it for? People of different faiths or no faith will have various answers to these questions, but for us as Christians, Jesus hints at a theological answer: “The emperor can have this coin, but remember that everything comes from God.”

William Stringfellow was an attorney in Harlem in the 1960s. He was also one of the great lay theologians of the Episcopal Church, and he read this gospel story in the way I’m suggesting. His conclusion was interesting. He said that we ought to view money sacramentally. Let me explain that.

Think of the two great sacraments of the church: Baptism and Eucharist. In each case, we take something ordinary – bread, wine, water – and we sanctify it for the purposes of God. It becomes infused with a power and meaning that is intended to renew and transform our lives.

Well, Stringfellow said that money can be used in the same way. There’s no doubt that money has power. It’s much more than a piece of paper. The trick is in how that power is deployed. Money can restore lives, build community and bring us closer to God. But it can also ruin lives and bring us closer to idolatry. The challenge then, the challenge that Stringfellow poses and the challenge this gospel poses, is to use money sacramentally, for the purposes of God.

Now I don’t have the definitive answer about how to do that, but I do think it’s the right question. And as you reflect on that question, I will say that I hope part of your answer is to continue your support of this church. Today is Stewardship Sunday, and I’d be remiss if I didn’t thank you for your generosity over the past year and encourage you to give again for the year ahead. We have all the normal bills to pay and programs to fund, and on top of that it’s a really exciting time: we’re growing, we’re approaching our centennial celebration, and we’re planning for the next century of mission and ministry.

So I hope that supporting the church is part of your answer, but don’t stop there. Look at the rest of your lives and the community around you, and think about how we can all use our money more faithfully, how we can use it sacramentally as a source of hope and transformation. Imagine what a difference that would make, if people across this country lived with the conviction that every day and every dollar was a divine gift. “You can have this coin,” Jesus might have said, “but remember that everything comes from God.” Amen.