

Preached by Rev. JF Hudson at Pilgrim Church: 11/04/07
Scripture: Luke 19: 1-10

“Giving With Joy!”

From the text: “When Jesus came to the place, he looked up and said to him, ‘Zacchaeus, hurry and come down; for I must stay at your house today.’”

It is a social cliché that there are three so-called taboo subjects that one just does not bring up in polite or mixed company. Now every one here knows what these verboten topics are, right? Sex, religion and politics. The underlying assumption here is that these topics are off limits because they are among the most private and personal of human matters—what we do in the bedroom, what we do with our God and what we do in the voting booth. But to this trio of tricky and sticky wickets I’d add a fourth item that in many ways carries much more power and much more influence than all those other three hot potatoes combined and that my friends is money, money.

How we desire it. How we seek it. How we earn it. How we spend it. How much we have. How much we have squirreled away for a rainy day. How much or how little we devote to charitable giving. I’m a bit embarrassed to admit that as a preacher I would much rather talk about the “easy” topics of say gay marriage or the war in Iraq than this risky subject of money, in particular the question of how much money we give away and whether we see our Christian stewardship as central and reflective of our faith in Jesus Christ.

But today, on this the first of our three Stewardship Sundays, as our faith community declares “I Love My Church Because!”, as we begin our drive to raise the funds to support our ministries for the year ahead, I’m going to take that risk and talk about money, faith and God. I’m going to take out my wallet, put it on the pulpit and talk to you about how I have come to a place where I see the giving of a portion of my money to the church and other charitable causes as a joy, that’s right a joyful responsibility, and a central tenet in my life as a disciple of Jesus Christ and an active and committed church member.

I share my witness not hold myself up as a paragon of faith, far from it. It has taken me a long time to get to this place. I share it not to shame us: God wants us to be cheerful givers, not begrudging donors! I share it as your pastor and teacher and one who like all of us, struggles with the power that money has always wielded in my life.

So—let’s talk about money. A story. A key life lesson for me about money came one day when, as a teenager, I found one of my Dad’s paychecks on the kitchen counter. As I was innocently looking it over my Father came up behind me, snatched it away and said, “That is none of your business!” That encounter reinforced one overwhelming message I’ve always heard from our culture about money—that money is no one’s business but my own: what I make, what I keep, what I give away. Money is private. Money is personal. Money is even “secret” in a way.

But here’s the rub for me. As I have grown in faith, the message my faith tells me is this: give your whole life over to God. Bring to God all your deepest desires. If you are sick, ask God for healing. If you are lost, ask God for direction. If you are sad, ask

God for purpose and meaning. If a loved one is struggling, pray to God to help that person. If a social issue moves me, ask God to teach me about how to respond in action.

My Christian faith compels me, challenges me, asks me to come to my God completely, uncensored, fully, to bring to God everything and I mean everything in my life. So—at some point I had to ask—why was I willing to give to God my heart, my soul, my dreams, but not my wallet? My money. My cash. Why was how I spent my money off the table with God, private, while everything else was on the table with the Lord, public? Like Zaccheus, I had a conversion, a moment where I realized that if I were to be serious about my faith in Jesus, I'd have to invite him into my financial house, my financial household. Do you hear that? As a rich man and a tax collector Zaccheus took a huge risk and broke a big social taboo by asking Christ into his house and life. Yet Zaccheus was ready—ready to give it all to this wise man of God. But are we?

For me the Christian faith walk is about asking God to go with me every step of the way: into valleys of despair and mountaintops of joy and even into my study each month when I take out my checkbook and pay my bills. Because my bank statement isn't just about pluses and minuses and withdrawals and deposits: that statement is also a statement of my values, my values: what is important to me, what matters to me, where I put my treasure. So for me to give with joy, real joy and liberation I've got to let God, ask God to have a say in how I spend my money: how much I give away, the causes I support, the things I buy, the cash I accumulate.

I've got two sisters who are CPAs and so at tax time they figure everything out for me. But: a part of my faith promise is this: God is my bookkeeper too, God is my bookkeeper, the one who offers the final accounting. So on April 15th, God and not just the IRS, looks at that tax return and challenges me: how much did you give away this year John? Were you generous? Were you joyful? Were you grateful?

Now friends I know this conversion, this giving over of our wallets to God, this inviting Jesus into our financial lives: it is not an easy step. It will be foreign to many of us. If we grew up in faith traditions that rarely if ever talked about money and faith in the same sentence. If we grew up in financially challenged households where money had a lot of fear attached to it: will we have enough to eat this week? If we are used to seeing money as a completely private matter, no one's business but our own. If we are completely new to the church and have never been asked to commit a portion of our paycheck to God's work.

But there's Jesus. He's knocking at the door and when he comes into our hearts and lives he asks us not to hide away our wallets in fear or shame or anger or privacy. Instead he says, "Give me your whole life. Give with joy."

So—let's pat ourselves on the back. We've begun to talk about money, faith and God and the walls haven't caved in and the ceiling hasn't collapsed and it wasn't as bad as we thought. God as our personal bookkeeper—are you ready to hire the Holy One? Let all God's people say, "Amen!"