Everything is God’s

October 22, 2023 Stewardship Sunday

1 Thessalonians 1: 1-7 Russell Mitchell-Walker

Matthew 22: 15-22

This morning we begin our Stewardship Campaign and celebrate with gratitude the generosity of those who faithfully give and participate in this community in so many ways. One definition of stewardship I have heard over the years, is that it is everything we do after we say ‘I believe’. We recognize that all we have comes from God, and what we do and how we give, shows our stewardship, our care of all we have been given, all we have received. The theme we have set for this year’s stewardship campaign is Re-engaging the Spirit of Eastside which reflects the acknowledgement that we are rebuilding as we move out of the last three years of the Pandemic and that all sectors of our society are experiencing disengagement following the pandemic. In our stewardship letter from the Gratitude Team that are available for you to pick up today, we state it as follows: “Through this theme we encourage and pray for members to re-engage with the nurturing, inclusive, joyful community of Eastside. The last few years have been challenging, and as we continue to navigate a new normal, we need our community to be engaged with our worship, our volunteer needs, our ministries, and our financial needs. We are grateful for your presence in our congregation, whether in person or virtually.” I celebrate that those of you who are here, have re-engaged. We experienced a wonderful example of re-engagement at the Small Business fair last weekend, with those who helped out, contributed baking and those who came. For those of you who are here, in person and online, thank you, and I invite you to think about who you haven’t seen, who haven’t been around, who you haven’t heard from. I invite you to check in with them. Invite them to re-engage. I know I have a list of people I need to contact that I have identified and I know I have not done as well at following up with them as I could have. We have a wonderful, welcoming, community that is a blessing to be a part of, which we need to nurture and support.

The Thessalonians, whom Paul is writing to in our scripture reading today, were also a wonderful blessed community. The community was inspired by Paul and Silas, whom they imitated in their faith. Paul gave them courage and inspiration to face their challenges, as a community which was persecuted as a newly formed Christian Community. They became filled with the Spirit to guide and strengthen them through the challenges.

Jesus had the Spirit with him through the challenges he faced from the Pharisees and Herodians in todays’ gospel reading. These two groups, the Pharisees, usually critical of Rome, and the supporters of Herod, the puppet ruler of the Roman Empire, usually despised each other. However, they have found common cause in wanting to stop Jesus. They have devised a question that they are sure will trap Jesus, because if he says they should pay taxes to the Emperor, the Jewish community will be upset, and if he says they shouldn’t pay taxes, then the Empire will see him as a revolutionary. Jesus, guided by the Spirit, sees through their insincere complement and their trap. Jesus asks them to show the coin used to pay taxes, and when they produce one, it makes the whole group look bad because no one is supposed have such a coin in the temple. He then cleverly asks what image is on the coin. The image is of the Emperor, Caesar, and it says “Tiberius Caesar, august son of the divine Augustus, high priest”, basically saying he is the son of God. By asking what image is on the coin, Jesus, is pointing to the reference in Genesis that we are all created in God’s image and shows they are also breaking one of the commandments that we are not to worship anyone else but God alone. As they are now totally shamed and embarrassed, Jesus then tells them to ‘give the emperor the things that are the emperors, and to God the things that are God’s’. But what is God’s but everything, therefore all is to be given back to God.

How are we stewards of all that God gives us? Jesus is clear that we can’t serve God and money. Over 40% of his teachings are a discourse about money, much of it challenging when we use money in ways that does not support the poor or build up the community. As we consider what we give as part of our stewardship campaign, let us celebrate all that the generosity of our community enables us to do.

* Your generosity supports programs of Open Hearts, Open Minds, Open Books, Film and Faith, Community Dinner, INI Café, Messy Church, and Courageous Faith.
* Your generosity supports weekly online prayer services, Meditation group, Sunday worship online and in person, music ministry, children’s time programming, and Sunday morning tech support.
* Your generosity supports pastoral care through visits, nursing home services, calls, funerals, weddings, and baptisms.
* Your generosity supports outreach through ICF breakfasts, support of 2SLGBTQ at events like the Pride Parade and PIE Day, and advocating for the unhoused.
* Your generosity supports opportunities to reach the neighbourhood through events like the Small Business Fair, and the Easter Egg hunt.
* Your generosity supports the Living Spirit Centre offering ministries like shared services on special Sundays, Advent and Lent; caring for our building and property, and beautifying our space seasonally.
* Your generosity supports office administration which provides our online presence, the weekly email, PowerPoints for Sundays, booking space, warm hospitality, and so much more.

The invitation to re-engage with the Spirit of Eastside is essential if we want to continue and grow this ministry. As we have been hearing, we are behind financially, especially in envelope giving, that puts us in a forecasted deficit of $20-30,000 this year. This is partly because of the post-pandemic dis-engagement we are living through. This deficit will deplete the surplus funds we presently have and so we need a significant increase in commitment of giving for next year, if we want to continue what we are presently offering. If we do not, we need to consider which of the areas listed above are we going to get rid of or stop offering? That is the decision we may need to make. That is why this Stewardship campaign is so important.

Jesus was wise and creative in his response to the challenges presented to him by the Pharisees and Herodians. Can we be wise and creative as we move forward in ministry together? We have stepped up when needed before and I believe we can do it again. That creativity will probably involve continuing to be open to and intentionally having conversation with other congregations who may be willing to partner, share with or even join us. Committing to our ministry, our community and this creativity, will be essential if we want to continue being an important witness and presence to a community in need of a progressive message of love and justice from the church. It is essential in this time of increasing individualism and limiting of rights and freedoms. May we step up to this challenge and guided by the Holy Spirit, re-engage in the Spirit of Eastside, a Spirit of Open Minds, Open Hearts, Open Doors.