

*Stewardship Sermon*

*ECOHS, 10-22-17*

How are we connected to God? How are we connected to one another? Based on the witness of the Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament-- and based on our own life experience-- we are connected to God and one another by love.

In one of the first divine self-revelations in the Hebrew Scriptures, just a few verses after what we read this morning, God proclaimed to Moses,

*“The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin...”*

And we all know one of the most famous passages from the New Testament,

*“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.”* And also *“We know love by this, that (Jesus) laid down his life for us—and we ought to lay down our lives for one another.”* And *“Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God.”*

Beyond the witness of the Bible, we do not have to look far to see love expressed so beautifully in our own lives—as a mother cares for a newborn infant; or a son cares for an aging mother who can no longer care for herself; or a woman who stands by her friend when she is going through marriage troubles; or the faithfulness between a married couple that fulfills their wedding vows in tangible ways and endures the changes and chances of life.

Love is powerful. Love endures. Love connects us to one another and to God, who is the source of all love.

But there is another thing that connects us as human beings and in a sense connects us to God: money. We know this in practical ways. If I go to the dry cleaners and try to pick up my clothes and say, “Credit that to love,” I am not going to get my clothes back. The same applies to all sorts of goods and services in life—healthcare and housing, food and transportation, and on and on. We need money to exist in this world and our economy. We want to be paid for a good day’s work. And of course the government wants to be paid in taxes for the services they provide to its citizens. They are very inflexible about that.

That reality is part of what we hear in the Gospel for today. Jesus’ opponents are using money and taxes as a way to try to trick Jesus. They have tried various things like asking him about the Sabbath and the Commandments and the Temple; and so far Jesus has turned every question back on them and confused them in their efforts to try to trip him up.

This time, they try to ask him another “no win” type of question. If he answers their query one way, he risks alienating his followers and being seen as a sell out to Rome. If he answers another way, he will give his opponents evidence to present to Pilate that this prophet is someone who is resisting the Empire. What will Jesus say?

Of course he gives his famous response that has entered our common sayings, *“Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s.”* We are told his opponents are amazed by this response and that they give up trying to trick him and just walk away.

We have heard these words before. But what do they mean exactly? How do they help us to understand what connects us to God and to one another? Does Jesus’ teaching help us discern how to live in love as his followers? Do his words help us navigate a world controlled in many ways by money? I think so. Let’s unpack what Jesus says.

If we are to live as people who believe in God’s love and pray for grace to follow Jesus’ example and commandments to love God and people; then we need to know what’s what in life. There is and always will be an emperor in the world. The emperor personifies the political and economic system that we live within.

Sometimes a particular emperor will do more good than bad and the system will work more fairly, at least for a time. As citizens, our job is to pray for the leaders of this world system and challenge them to “love like Jesus” as we say in our diocesan mission statement. And in addition to our prayers, we are to “render unto Caesar what is Caesar’s”—that is pay what we owe in taxes (whether we like it or not).

As followers of Jesus, we do not need to be so other worldly that we do not participate in the world system, including paying taxes. But there is more. The world’s system is complex and lacks the one thing that is so important so that we are connected to God and one another—love. There are of course members of the system who express love. But the system itself has no soul, has no capacity to truly love.

That’s where the second part of Jesus’ teaching comes in—*“give to God the things that are God’s.”* Those things begin with the very heart of our hearts, that inner loyalty that we can never convert into a commercial transaction. That central part of us made in God’s image and where we experience God’s grace and truth.

That part of us belongs only to God. And our loyalty to God is expressed in love. Things like compassion and mercy and forgiveness and doing what’s right even when it is hard. That is the type of love God gives to us and commands us in turn to give to others. When we get the love part right in our lives, the money part falls into place for us as people of faith.

Now I am saying all this in the context of our stewardship campaign. Talking about money can be uncomfortable. Most of us do not like to talk about money in church. That includes me. As your pastor over these past eight-plus years, I have not talked about money

and giving very often. I never want to be one of those ministers who manipulates people to give money. So I won't do that today either. During this month of discerning our future together, we are called to pray and to give as we decide with God's help.

But I do want to explore for a minute how the church straddles these two competing forces that unite us with God and one another. Money can be a tool to help us express God's love in tangible ways. Not unlike the government or a business or a worker, money is needed for the church because we exist in the current world system.

The church needs money so we can do practical things. Like pay for people who provide professional expertise and specialized ministry such as priests, musicians, teachers, and administrators. Many of the tasks of the church are done by volunteers—that is the time and talent part of our giving—and that is important. But without clergy and staff professionals, it would be harder for us to exist and thrive as a church.

But it is more than paying for experts in the work of ministry. Love is still the underlying motive and inspiration for those of us employed in the church. None of us are doing this because we have made a calculation for how we can earn the most money. That is the world's way of making vocational decisions.

Julie (and her teachers), Jeff, Cathy, Bonnie and I do this work out of a sense of calling from God's Spirit, confirmed by the church, and lived through God's love over years. Our shared ministry as your clergy and staff is a beautiful combination of the power of love and the practical reality of money that reveals God's gracious giving to all of us.

In the next few weeks, we will discern what is next for us as a people of faith in this congregation. Our mutual love and our pledging of money will be part of our discernment process. Your vestry and I will need to make some decisions about what ministry will look like here. Your personal and family discernment will be an important part of this decision process, too. It will be a blessing no matter what is pledged and given and no matter what we decide as leaders. That is how God's Spirit works.

My hope is that in this discernment, we remember what connects us. Money is a practical part of our life and our decision making. The dry cleaners will not do their work for love alone. But money is not the primary force in the universe that comes from God and returns to God again. That force is love.

That is especially true for those of us here who are "seeking to love and serve in the Spirit of Jesus Christ." During our discernment, may we all be blessed by this greatest gift of God's love expressed in Jesus Christ and manifested in and through God's church. Amen.