

Oct. 22, 2017 Who is the Emperor? Mat. 22:15-22 Caledon East UC Rev. R. Leckie

My life has had a lot of 'wedding talk' in it lately. Last weekend we had 'Josh and Nicky Cannon's wedding and on Thanksgiving weekend my son announced he is getting married to 'Lizzy' in the next year. So they are beginning to consider various possibilities. And things are a whole lot different at weddings than they were when I started in ministry.

You've seen or heard of those movies, "My Big Fat Greek Wedding," "The Wedding Crashers," "The Wedding Planner." But even so, I never really expected to meet a wedding planner. When I went in to the office, there were three of them there. Now I've been surprised to see the mother of the bride appearing with the "couple" coming to see the minister before, but as I looked at the two women, I could see no resemblance and their ages were not that different. Seeing my questioning look, the one said, "oh, I'm the wedding planner, would you like to talk with the couple alone first?"

Then a while ago one of the couples I was meeting with said, "You might want to check out our website." "You have a website about preparing for your wedding?" I said. Well, times certainly are changing. Sometimes, I have found, that if we hold off on the judgment card, we'll find that some of that change is good.

A few years ago, Jeff and Naomi Trapp Davis were married. At the time, they invited their friends and relatives to visit their webpage. On their webpage they had four links. One link was to the traditional department store registry. The second link was to a well-known Christian international aid organization dedicated to peace and justice issues. The third was to a Christian organization that builds low-cost housing on the west coast near where Naomi lived before she was married. The fourth was a link to a predominantly Jewish organization dedicated to building integrated communities for Palestinians and Jews in Israel. Friends and family members could give Jeff and Naomi a wedding gift by joining them in support of these organizations.

They said, "We felt very good about the charitable giving that was done in recognition of our wedding. We were glad that our friends and family felt they had many ways to celebrate our wedding with giving, and that those ways included gifts to the wider world. The gifts to aid organizations we knew something about, felt like gifts to us as well."

In an age when the costs and efforts put in to the wedding day can become so exorbitant, I find that a helpful, and hopeful story. Other couples have chosen to make charitable donations on behalf of their guests rather than give them small token gifts at the reception.

Money and what it represents can provide endless fodder for reflection in our society. We like to claim that "money isn't everything," and yet so much of our public and private discourse surrounds money: who has it and who doesn't, who needs it and who deserves it. Any Human Resources expert will tell you that money is a lousy motivator for performance and yet it seems to be a primary method of reward. When people go on strike, one of the demands often made is wage parity with others doing the same or similar jobs. It's not just the amount: we want our work to be valued as much as someone else's work. From what I understand of the recent Community College dispute is the desire to have more secure full time employment with the opportunity to plan ones life ahead for a couple of years, rather than part time employment which seems tied with last minute decisions by the administration.

When people complain about professional athletes, it often takes the form of griping about supposedly "exorbitant salaries." The claim of exorbitance is clearly based on some, often-undeclared, system of values that says one sort of activity ought to be rewarded at such a level relative to other activities. It's when the relationship seems to be out of whack that we begin to talk about exorbitance. Because of the way our society is structured, unemployment and poverty affect not just our capacity to secure the basics of food, shelter and so on, but also our self-esteem. If it were purely a financial matter, such issues would be hard enough, but the issues of self-worth and other people's valuation of us are in the mix as well.

Because of all those factors, and more, money is often a sensitive issue for conversation. John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, was preaching one time. "Make all you can," was Wesley's first point. A prosperous deacon seated behind him replied, "Amen." "Save all you can," was Wesley's second point. "Amen" was the response. The third point was, "Give all you can." "Now he's meddling," was the response. Despite the sheer amount of biblical text given over to issues of money and wealth and their application, talk of those subjects in worship is often construed as meddling.

We have one of those texts before us today. Only a little background should be needed to bring the story into sharp focus. First century Palestine was an occupied country and its citizens were subject to a variety of taxes-we can relate to that. In that era, it was common for a variety of coins to be in circulation. Taxes were paid to the imperial Roman authorities and to the Temple authorities in Jerusalem, by everyone. However, for reasons of religious and spiritual purity, the Temple tax had to be paid with special coins minted expressly for that purpose.

So Jesus' opponents sought to put him in an inescapable trap. If he says, "yes, it's lawful to pay taxes," he risks losing the affection of any Jew who resented the occupying powers. On the other hand, to say, "no, it is not lawful to pay taxes," would probably see him hauled off to jail as a subversive. On the one hand, Jesus' response, "give to Caesar that which is Caesar's" is as slippery as the question. On the other hand, it raises for us an issue we must all address: the dual citizenship and the double loyalties of the Christian. To whom are our highest loyalties due and are those loyalties ever divided?

Who is the emperor? In this passage it is the emperor of Rome, the infinitely distant figure whose power dominated the lives of everyone listening to Jesus at this moment. I would suggest that, for us, the emperor can be those elements of life that exercise immense power over us-our work, our personal hobbies, our pleasures. One very obvious example is our vocation, our life as an employee. This "emperor" has the power to lift us up or destroy us. This "emperor" can be terrible, suddenly declaring people redundant and wiping out jobs. I think some workplaces today are more demanding than ever. Manufacturing today is tied to 'just in time' making increased demands on suppliers to deliver without any variation, regardless of that which you really have no control over. Penalties are enacted on the driver who doesn't deliver within a 30 minute window of time. People are expected to be 'on call' and respond on their devices with barely an hour's notice. Given the chance, such a tyrant will take everything from us, even those things that belong elsewhere----to God!

In a race to prove something we can allow the 'emperors' who claim us all our time, our energy, our waking (and sometimes sleeping) thought. Such an autocratic despot is jealous of family time, human relationships, personal relaxation and rest.

Our Lord's statement can speak to us here, warning us to retrieve some balance in our lives. Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's. Jesus implies that there are areas of our lives that do not belong to this emperor. From time to time we need to take stock of our lives—rather in the same way that we review an investment portfolio--and ask the same questions: “How good are my spiritual investments? Are my investments balanced? Should I make changes?” Every one of these questions can be asked with equal, if not more meaning in the spiritual dimension of our lives.

Together, Canadians, in a way that is not common we mourned a loss this week, that of a ‘rock star’, Gord Downie. But what captured our attention was not his stardom, his rising to the top of a music career, but his uncommon focus. We are told that at home, he worked tirelessly to be a good father, son, brother, husband, and friend. His life was not a compromise. He was told the end is near and he found new beginnings. In the darkness, he found ways to keep creating the light, to keep on loving, and ultimately, keep on giving. He was determined to keep on serving as a unifying force while nudging Canada in the right direction, to take the long path of reconciliation with our aboriginal neighbours.

You may have seen a ship launched. There she sits, on dry land, shored up by beams, looking altogether out of place and utterly useless. Then the beams are removed, the champagne is swung and slowly she slides down the ways until she splashes into the water. There is a shudder and she rights herself. She is where she belongs, afloat, beautiful and useful. That's what happens when the Christian decides to recognize the distinction of what belongs to God and Caesar and which is most important. When we launch out on the deeply imbedded principles of tithing then we have made that decision alive in our being. This year or next year's budget is not eternally important. What is of eternal importance is how many of us, starting this year and continuing in the future, will take the risk and move down the ways of our lives, until we are afloat where we belong, on the broad, adventurous ocean of God's love. May it be so for us. Amen