

Straining Gnats and Swallowing Camels: Money Matters
Sermon Preached by David D. Colby
Central Presbyterian Church
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Scripture: Exodus 23:16,19 and Matthew 6:19-21

“Don’t sweat the small stuff,” Jesus might have said. He is caught up in an argument with the scribes and Pharisees – two groups that the gospel of Matthew portrays as religious fanatics caught up in the minutia of faithfulness. Tithing, giving ten percent of everything they have is a religious duty. And so they do it, carefully, precisely. So there they are, tithing even the spices with which they cook. Picture a spotless kitchen, carefully swept and dusted – all loose particles are gone, nothing but spotless countertops and small scales for measuring. And carefully they bring out their tablespoons and teaspoons, and the jars of spices. First the mint, every tenth leaf goes to the temple. Then the dill, tougher to measure, but with care they weigh out ten percent. Same with the cumin. Models of faithfulness? That is how they were thought of by others, and likely, how they thought of themselves. But Jesus says,

Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint, dill, and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice, and mercy and faith. It is these you have ought to have practiced without neglecting the others. You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel! (Matthew 23:23-24)

Camille suggested this passage for our three-week sermon series on Christian priorities, and I have grown to love it. Jesus, showing a bit of humor, anger, and a desire for priorities all at once. This is about more than the specific scribes and Pharisees – with these words Jesus pokes a hole in our human tendency toward big words and little follow-through. “You hypocrites. . . You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel.”

If religion is simply about following the letter of the law, but ignoring the spirit of the justice, mercy, and faith – well, you might as well swallow a camel. Forget measuring out the spices to the nearest tenth of an ounce. Get the important stuff in mind, Jesus says. For faith is about priorities – using time, talents, money to follow in the ways of God.

I have an old tennis shirt that I still wear once in a while on the tennis court. In big letters and symbols it says, “keep your eye on the ball.” Now that I think about it, maybe I shouldn’t wear it during matches – I can’t see what I have on my chest and the print is large enough for people across the net to be reminded of a good philosophy. Keep your eye on the ball. Focus on the important things. Don’t strain out gnats but swallow a camel.

Presbyterians are thinking people. And, as such, we may turn our noses up too readily at any cute slogans, any mottos that seem too reductionistic or simplistic or whatever. But in this case, I think Jesus is saying, don’t overthink your faith, or justify your actions by complexity. No need to measure out the spices for tithing. Focus on justice, mercy and faith. Jesus appears

like a sports coach, or a life coach, with the equivalent of “keep your eye on the ball.” “Focus on the big picture.” Instead of measuring out the last ounce of dill, Jesus announces that we have “bigger fish to fry.”

But don’t think Jesus is saying just focus on spiritual things – never mind the tithing. Don’t make the mistake of thinking Jesus is saying, “Keep your money and just have faith.” Remember, Jesus talks about money more than just about anything else in the Bible. Over and over the topic of money comes up in the parables and teachings of Jesus. Some have said that in our day, we North American Christians are preoccupied with sex because it keeps us from the more troublesome idea that how we spend our money shows what our faith is really about. Jesus cares about how we gain and spend and invest our financial resources, and that can be a revolutionary thought.

In the middle of what we now know as his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said,
Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven. . . For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

Again, a simplistic slogan is enough for Jesus. Where your treasure is, there your heart is also. Another way of saying, “Put your money where your mouth is.” Or better yet, “Put your money where your faith is.” “Show me your checkbook,” someone once said to me, “and I will show you your priorities.”

“Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” And with that simple statement, Jesus put an end to the need to measure out one tenth of your spice cabinet to donate to God. It’s not about a tenth, it’s about putting your money where your faith is.

Now that is a radical reorienting of our priorities. Martin Luther said that there are three conversions necessary for every Christian: the conversion of the heart, the conversion of the mind, and (the most challenging) the conversion of the purse.¹

Goodbye to any self-righteous legalistic approach – that if we just give away ten percent of our income God will be satisfied and we can do what we want with the rest of it. Our faith might demand more of us than that. That maybe God wants us to give more than ten percent of our income, our spices, our possessions – that God wants our heart as well as our financial gifts.

As a pastor, I have the privilege of sharing many intimate moments with people. I have been in your hospital rooms, and gathered with families before a funeral. I have counseled people preparing to get married, and with youth dealing with their parents’ divorce. One unique moment of pastoral intimacy stands out in my mind right now. I was asked to dinner to provide some suggestions and guidance on how someone should give away his money. He had saved up the many appeals he had received, and had a budget of funds that he had set aside to give to do the work of God in the world. And it was my privilege to be there as he struggled to decide where his money would do the most good.

There are a lot of important organizations doing God’s work in the world. Non-profit groups working to end poverty; organizations that provide food and clothing; I would add

colleges and other schools to the list of deserving institutions. You might believe that a particular political candidate or party is making a difference in carrying out God's vision for the world and is a worthy recipient of your donations. But if you were to ask me where you should give the most significant portion of your money in order to do God's work, let me suggest Central Presbyterian Church right here in Saint Paul, Minnesota.

I want to spend just a few moments talking about Central. So much good happens here. Here at this church we welcome young babies, and teach children that they are loved by God, and created equal in God's image. Here at this church we welcome people who need a few minutes of peace in the midst of a hectic day through our open sanctuary. Here at Central we use our building, our volunteers and our dollars to do mission work that is vitally needed in the city. Every November we put our resources to work as a temporary homeless shelter for homeless children and their parents. Martha's Closet is known throughout our community not only for the clothes we provide to women, but for the dignity and hope that we provide as women head off to interviews and new jobs. Every Wednesday, people from around the neighborhood gather for lunch in our church basement. And while we aren't pushy about faith at these lunches, the church basement becomes the location for community-building, conversation about important matters, and gratitude. Faith isn't just about community, conversation, and gratitude, but those are all key elements of a vital faith and a vital city. And Central is central.

This week I had a meeting in the new "Forum" at Minnesota Public Radio's headquarters. The forum is a new studio used for community events up on the fifth floor of their new addition. And the view is magnificent, stretching to the capitol. But there, everyone who is standing in media headquarters, looking to the capitol, sees the stained glass windows and the spire on our steeple, pointing up to heaven. Between the media and the capitol stands our spire, pointing up to heaven, guiding our perspective and rearranging our priorities.

One important way to be a good steward is to make sure that your values live on beyond your death. I hope that you will consider putting Central in your will. We can help you with creative giving opportunities.

But don't wait until late in your life to start a discipline of stewardship. You don't have to have a fortune to make a difference. Dick Craft, a Presbyterian minister who provides stewardship advice to churches says that somebody once said to him, "I wish I were rich enough to be a philanthropist." He said, "You are."²

Our story from the book of Exodus tells of a fundamental biblical principle about stewardship. We are to offer God what are called, our "first fruits." It dates back to an agricultural offering of the first pickings of the crop – the best part – the tallest wheat, the plumpest corn, the ripest berries. We are to give God, Exodus says, the first fruits. Not the last fruits, not the fruits in danger of spoiling. Not the leftovers after we have had our fill. The first fruits. It is such a different concept than collecting all the spices and weighing out the last tenth.

Our stewardship practices might look a lot different if we can remember this principle of giving over to God our first fruits. Setting aside an offering before we go to the restaurant or on

the fancy trip. Not giving out of what we have left over and can afford to lose. Giving our best to do God's work in this world that is in so much need of justice and mercy and faith.

It is an important Christian priority – using our money to put our faith into action. And it is right to give of stewardship as a joy and not as an obligation. I have heard some pastors plead with church members to tithe, to give their first fruits and then promise that if they do so God will reward them with even more. I cringe, because it is not a promise that we can make – that God will take our offerings and reward us with financial interest. We are not the venture capitalists bankrolling God's ideas with loan guarantees and interest. But on the other hand, I do know that people who enjoy giving often say that their life is ever the richer, that when they think they are doing the giving they receive more than they ever could have expected.

Every Sunday, we receive an offering. We expect, of course, that people will put in checks, and envelopes of cash. But every week we say something like with these gifts we offer our time, our talents, and our financial resources to do the work of God in the world. And we mean it. In our Reformed tradition, it is the offering that is the highlight of the worship service. I have told this story before, and it will stay with me as long as I preach the gospel. My friend Susan Andrews, the former Moderator of our denomination, tells the story of when she was a young girl. Her favorite part of being at church was hearing the sound that her quarter would make when it dropped into the plush-lined offering plate. And then as the ushers brought the plates forward, she imagined herself curled up in the offering plate – carried forward as a full offering to God of her time, her talents, and her quarter.

And that, in the end, is what Christianity is all about. Following Jesus wherever he leads. Using the time we have been given, the talents with which we have been blessed, our full financial resources – to live out our faith, to focus on what is important, to do God's work in this world. Amen.

¹ Thanks to the Rev. Greg Jones, pastor at Westminster Presbyterian Church in Wilmington, Delaware for pointing me to this quote in a church newsletter 16 November, 2005.

² www.pcusa.org/stewardship/pdfs/provocations.pdf