

There's an interesting video on Youtube Called the Race for \$100, where the leader is lining up young adults to compete, and before starting he says things like "If you had two parents caring for you as a kid, take two steps forward. If you never worried about your next meal, never had to help parents pay the bills, take two steps forward. He goes down a long list of things, each time inviting those who were blessed with extras to take two steps forward, and finally he invites the people who are at the front to take a look back. He says, "This is what privilege looks like. The people back there at the starting line may be fast runners, they may be more determined to run than you are, but you are already so far ahead – that's why you are likely to finish first."

Here's what I'd like to say about that video: We don't need to feel guilty about being blessed, but simply recognize that many of us are. There's been a loud call lately for those of us who are privileged by our socio-economic background, the color of our skin, or our gender to recognize privilege. But it is not a new call. For God has been reminding us for a very long time to remember that we are not self-made. People who mistakenly think they have accomplished all their blessings are misguided. No matter how hard you have worked, someone helped you along the way. Strangely, we wonder where God is when we are suffering adversity, but when life is going well, we forget God and lose our way.

Deuteronomy 8:11-19

Take care that you do not forget the LORD your God, by failing to keep his commandments, his ordinances, and his statutes, which I am commanding you today. ¹² When you have eaten your fill and have built fine houses and live in them, ¹³ and when your herds and flocks have multiplied, and your silver and gold is multiplied, and all that you have is multiplied, ¹⁴ then do not exalt yourself, forgetting the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of

the house of slavery,¹⁵ who led you through the great and terrible wilderness, an arid wasteland with poisonous snakes and scorpions. He made water flow for you from flint rock,¹⁶ and fed you in the wilderness with manna that your ancestors did not know, to humble you and to test you, and in the end to do you good.¹⁷ Do not say to yourself, "My power and the might of my own hand have gotten me this wealth."¹⁸ But remember the LORD your God, for it is he who gives you power to get wealth, so that he may confirm his covenant that he swore to your ancestors, as he is doing today.¹⁹ If you do forget the LORD your God and follow other gods to serve and worship them, I solemnly warn you today that you shall surely perish. (NRS)

Gratitude begins by acknowledging the Source of all goodness. It all went wrong when the first humans, whom we call Adam and Eve, were in the garden, blessed with everything they needed. But they could not be satisfied. They wanted the one thing they were told to leave alone. They wanted to possess everything and it continues to our day – this sinful human condition – the desire for no limits, questioning God, and not being satisfied and thankful for all we already have. Wisdom is knowing that limits are good and that we owe our lives to God. But what do we owe to Caesar, to the government? That was the question the Pharisees used, trying to trap Jesus. Hear the story.

Matthew 22:15-22

Then the Pharisees met together to find a way to trap Jesus in his words.¹⁶ They sent their disciples, along with the supporters of Herod, to him. "Teacher," they said, "we know that you are genuine and that you teach God's way as it really is. We know that you are not swayed by people's opinions, because you don't show favoritism."¹⁷ So tell us what you think: Does the Law allow people to pay taxes to Caesar or not?"¹⁸ Knowing their evil motives, Jesus replied, "Why do you test me, you hypocrites?¹⁹ Show me the coin used to pay the tax." And they brought him a denarion.²⁰ "Whose image and inscription is this?" he asked.²¹ "Caesar's," they replied. Then he said, "Give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God."²² When they heard this they were astonished, and they departed. (CEB)

So Jesus wiggled out of that losing battle. The Pharisees believed that taxes paid to a pagan emperor were heretical. The Herodians believed not to pay taxes was sedition. Jesus manages an amazingly ambiguous answer. It's interesting to think about the coin bearing the image of Caesar, and we bearing the image of God. So coins given to Caesar, and our very lives given to God.

We belong to God – all that we are and have. But to live in community with others, we owe some taxes too, for the common good. In Jesus' day, tax collectors were often cheaters, like Zacchaeus before he met Christ and was transformed into a generous person by forgiveness. I'm sure the Pharisees thought they could get Jesus in trouble with the Romans by encouraging him to say, "It all belonged to God." Yet Jesus finds a way to validate a contribution to the state, to the government through taxes, while holding their highest loyalty to God. We could take a lesson from Jesus on this – to acknowledge the complexities of life and give room for nuance. Most of our wars and other battles around the globe come down to issues of possession. Whose is it? The Holy Lands. Whose are they?

This country? Whose is it? Does it belong equally to all of us, no matter our religion? Does it belong to poor and wealthy alike? Does it belong to Black, Brown, and White? Does it belong to the great-grandchildren of those who were brought here on slave ships, or the children who crossed the Mexican border with their parents and those who were here, before the colonies? Nearly all of these, along with those born with disabilities, by no fault of their own, ended up at the back of the line and the back of the bus.

What about your house – whose is it? When we first moved here, it was clear that our house was only part ours. It is a shared house, a half-manse, and for the first four years of Peace's life, it was the church office, the meeting place for ministry teams, small worship services, and youth group, as well as the place where Deiberts lived. Gia's house was the music room of the church.

What about your time – whose is it? You are the manager of your time – do you manage it God's way or your way? But time is a gift of God, given for our careful stewarding. Do you seek God's will in deciding how to spend your time?

Last but not least, your pay check, your bank account, your stocks. Whose are they? Is there a tiny voice going off in your head, saying "Mine!"

Do you get the protective urges of a five year old with a new toy, and wander off to the corner to distract yourself when we talk about money, so no one can challenge your possessiveness? The size of the Gratitude Class today will tell me how willing you are to examine your life and consider sharing more of your toys.

So if you are clinging to what is YOURS, then of course, first of all, you will resent the government taking any of it for the greater good of our country – for defense, social security, Medicare, and education, road, etc. even if it benefits you. And you will give only your leftovers to God as a small token of appreciation. It's like the seven year old with a Halloween bag-ful of candy, only giving away the candies she does not like. This matter goes right to the heart of our relationship with God. Do you and all that you have belong to yourself or to God? Do you trust God to take care of you, as we discussed last week? And are you able to see beyond your own needs to the needs of the world?

You know with family and close friends that it is the sacrifices that make love run deep. It is the sleepless nights with children, the constant effort given to keeping them on the right track. The same is true in our relationship with God – total sacrifice on God's part. And the only appropriate response to being loved so completely is to love back, giving what we can with hearts filled with gratitude and trust.

So that's why the first thing we should do after Caesar gets his taxes, is give a tithe back to God in gratitude. 10 to God, 10 to Savings, and 80 to live on. That is challenging for many in the current economy, but it is the best. If a tithe will immediately put you in debt, because your standard of living presses every penny of your income, then reconsider your standard of living. What can be adjusted? And then decide what percentage you can give, and give it with discipline. Give it first, not last.

I challenge you: even if your pledge is given monthly or electronically, consider bringing some extra cash as an offering each week. Spend it to help others as easily as you would spend that extra bit while shopping for yourself. Have you ever wondered why we say "tithes and offerings" Tithe is the commitment. Offering is the extra. We have many special offerings at Peace, especially in years of natural disaster like this.

You have given an extra \$10,000 in disaster relief in two months, which just demonstrates our ability to give when we allow the Spirit to open our hearts to the joy of giving and to the pain of others in need.

Sue Seiter shared this week a beautiful story about her experience with the Books for Kids program. She was reading to a group of elementary children and when it was time to pass out the give-away books, several kids wanted the one about the Titanic. This meant someone would be unhappy. But one little girl decided she should share her Titanic book with a boy who had wanted it just as much as she did. This caring little girl does not even have a house to call home. The one suffering homelessness is the generous one.

Very often, the more we have, the more we cling to what we have – like a security blanket. But have you noticed, that no matter how much you have, it is never quite enough to make you feel secure. Security comes from trusting God. Whether you've saved too little or saved enough to live comfortably to 130, please consider putting the church in your will. Your children will not miss the percentage you give to God, and it is the last chance you have to demonstrate your commitment to God before meeting God face-to-face. What a joy to leave behind a legacy of trust like that. In life and in death we belong to God, so let us respond to God's love with grateful hearts and generous hands.

One final life-giving story about a young man in Wales named Dan Black, 25, paraplegic for three years after a bicycle accident. His family and friends had created a special fund to fly Dan to China for an experimental stem-cell treatment. The equivalent of \$30,000 had been raised, when he learned of a five year old with cerebral palsy who needed a special surgery in St Louis. After much thought and talking to his family and friends, Dan donated his entire fund to little Brecon because as Dan said, the little guy had never known the freedom of walking. Whose was that money? It was Dan's but he chose to sacrifice for another. That is love!