

“Generosity”

Haggai 1: 1 – 7; Matthew 12: 13 – 17

Makemie Memorial Presbyterian Church

January 11, 2009 Ordination, Installation & Recognition of Officers

Haggai 1: 1 - 7

¹In the second year of King Darius, in the sixth month, on the first day of the month, the word of the LORD came by the prophet Haggai to Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and to Joshua son of Jehozadak, the high priest: ²Thus says the LORD of hosts: These people say the time has not yet come to rebuild the Lord’s house. ³Then the word of the LORD came by the prophet Haggai, saying: ⁴Is it a time for you yourselves to live in your paneled houses, while this house lies in ruins? ⁵Now therefore thus says the LORD of hosts: Consider how you have fared. ⁶You have sown much, & harvested little; you eat, but you never have enough; you drink, but you never have your fill; you clothe yourselves, but no one is warm; and you that earn wages earn wages to put them into a bag with holes. ⁷Thus says the LORD of hosts: Consider how you have fared.

Mark 12: 13 - 17

¹³Then they sent to him some Pharisees and some Herodians to trap him in what he said. ¹⁴And they came and said to him, “Teacher, we know that you are sincere, and show deference to no one; for you do not regard people with partiality, but teach the way of God in accordance with truth. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not? ¹⁵Should we pay them, or should we not?” But knowing their hypocrisy, he said to them, “Why are you putting me to the test? Bring me a denarius and let me see it.” ¹⁶And they brought one. Then he said to them, “Whose head is this, and whose title?” They answered, “The emperor’s.” ¹⁷Jesus said to them, “Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s.” And they were utterly amazed at him.

This ends our reading.

When Carol & Lee Johnson were up in New York City last fall on Sunday, they visited Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church where my former preaching professor Scott Black Johnston is now the Senior Pastor. I refer to Scott today for two stories he told me when I called to brag on Carol & Lee as fine representatives of church Makemie. Scott's first story is about how he takes public transportation into the city, the train. Well he got up & it was raining & he reached for an umbrella & he discovered all of his umbrellas were at work, so he just stuck on this funny hat he has; a cross between a pork pie & a fedora & went out into the rain & just got soaked. He gets on the train & a little lady comes up & sits next to him, she has an umbrella that she puts next to her seat & it leans onto Scott's leg. So when Scott got up, he said, "I instinctively took it & started to leave."

This is New York now, so the lady yells, "Hey! That's my umbrella, bring it back!"

Scott said he apologized, "Sorry ma'am. I'm a minister..."

She said, "Sure."

He said, "I just instinctually did that & I apologize."

She said, "Okay."

During the day his wife called & reminds him, “Scott, you have four umbrellas at the office just gather them up & bring them home.”

So he wrapped them up & he got on that same train. And sure enough there she is walking right down the aisle & he started to explain & she said, “It’s been a pretty good day for you hasn’t it?”

It’s a pretty good day, the day we ordain & install & recognize our officers. A pretty good day.

And on this pretty good day I have a question, what would you say is the single most reliable indication as to an individual’s charitable generosity? The answer; the frequency by which they attend church or mosque or synagogue.

Studies are quite clear – people who attend church once a month or more are two to three times more generous than those who attend less frequently or not at all. It would appear that this is not just an American phenomena because a panelist in a Dutch study made a similar observation that religious people in the Netherlands are two to six times more generous than those who are non-religious.

Here is my second Scott Black Johnston story. You may remember back in the 90’s the Presbyterian church issued a document on human sexuality that was somewhat controversial & in

some congregations it released a firestorm. So Scott, who was attending a church on the outskirts of Austin, asked a friend who was a Methodist minister to come & help these Tyler Texas Presbyterians sort through their feelings about this report. Well, the Methodist minister, the Reverend Ray Reed said,

“No. Thanks. But no thanks. I’m really not interested in sharing things with people who have already made up their minds and who will take what I say as fodder for their particular arguments.”

“I know” Scott said, “but you have such a wonderful reputation as a teacher, won’t you come & teach about something? You choose the subject.”

Ray thought for a second & he said, “Alright. How would it be if I conducted a two week seminar on money?”

Scott said, “That’s fine.”

Well Ray came & taught & the seminar went very very well until it comes to the part where Ray says, “I’d like to give you all a take home assignment. Next week I’d like you all to bring back your check books. You know checkbooks say something about our values & our priorities. I’d like all of you to bring back your checkbooks & we’re going to pass them around.”

No one showed up the next week.

And with eyes just shining, Ray said, “That’s how I came to unite a Presbyterian congregation divided over the subject of human sexuality by inviting them to talk about money.”

Now Jesus talked about money. Some New Testament scholars tell us that Jesus had more to say about money & how we use our possessions than any other subject. Ironically I can’t think of a situation where Jesus took an offering or raised funds. But he very deliberately linked God talk with money talk. He did so because money & time are the sacred currencies by which we navigate our way through God’s world.

In fact, as I read the stories Jesus told & the principles he taught it strikes me that for Jesus how we use our money, how we tithe are ways in which we can take that kingdom he describes as out there at the tips of our fingers & make it a reality; not some time in the future but a reality in our world today.

Smart money seeks to make God’s kingdom a reality as we wrap our arms around the caring needs of God’s people. Sacred gifts are very fragile. Sacred gifts can be easily misused. You may recall in Luke 16 the story of the rich man & the beggar named Lazarus. I like

to think of it as the story of a homeless person & a billionaire. To understand this story I think it helps if we know that Jesus is talking to a group of fat cat tax attorneys, religious fundamentalists who think they have all the answers & snide government bureaucrats. Jesus tells this story because he wants to underscore that whoever we are, however we see ourselves, we are all vulnerable to a sneaky virus called "*philarguria*" or as the text translates it "love of money." That's just good old fashion greed. The rich man lived his life focused on himself & his consumption. He lived blind to the homeless person who existed right outside his door. And the point of the story is not to put down people of; wealth or religious convictions or political influence. The story is told to underscore all the ways we can misuse this sacred gift of money; we're all vulnerable to this virus of greed. Jesus says at the end of this story, "Be on your guard for the stumbling blocks & millstones in life that can trip you up & keep you from becoming faithful disciples."

Now I've discovered for the most part us religious folks are uncomfortable talking about money. Money talk seems to give us a big dose of anxiety & guilt. Jesus never told anyone how much to give, he never told them where to give, but in this story that is our

gospel lesson that Ted read just a little bit ago (it is also found in Matthew & Luke) the point is very simple. I'll summarize. The religious bureaucrats are out to get Jesus. They're threaten by Jesus' talk about the kingdom of God & they want to know is Jesus some smooth talking street preacher out to disturb our notions of spiritual propriety? Or perchance is Jesus a political revolutionary; someone who under the guise of religion is playing politics & is really advocating peace with Rome? And the question comes to a head one day at the temple in Jerusalem. The Pharisees & Herodians ask Jesus the question out right. "Hey, Jesus," my translation, "since you seem to know this thing about taxes & civil responsibilities, well tell us, `Do we pay taxes to Caesar or don't we?'"

Now here comes one of the all time great responses. I love this. Continuing with my translation, "Jesus says, `Uh, do one of you happen to have a coin in your pocket?"

And the instant they reach into their pockets they are implicated & their hypocrisy is exposed. They are the ones carrying Cesar's money. They're the ones who have bought into Cesar's economic system. They're the ones in whose pockets the emperor's image is burning a hole. They're the ones who must decide what it means to

be faithful in the world in which they live. So what does Jesus answer? He says, "Give to Cesar what belongs to Cesar & give to God what belongs to God. You see there is no easy answer on how much we are to give. No uniform answer – but maybe what Jesus is saying is that we have civil responsibilities, we have religious responsibilities, we have social responsibilities & in the midst of the muddle of life we must sort through what is to live as faithful disciples, belonging to God, true to our convictions, sensitive to the world around us.

If God's kingdom has geography perhaps its longitude & latitude is time & money. Because it is one of the ways we witness to faith, civil responsibilities & public generosity. And if Jesus was telling us this story today he might ask if we have a dollar bill in our pocket & when we pull it out would ask, "How does it read?" And I hope we'd say, "Well, in God we trust."

In whom or what do we put our ultimate trust?

Material things are a part of God's creation. Owning things are a part of life. The question is how will we use what we have? How much should we give? How much should we keep? Where should we give? There is no concurrency among us about how we'll answer

those questions. Answers will be as diverse as stories of our individual lives. What Jesus is asking us to do is to think about the questions. How much do I need? How much can I give away?

Let's take this taboo subject off the shelf. Let's talk about it. And this invitation to talk puts us square into our lesson from Haggai. (I know a lesson from Haggai & it's only the second Sunday of the year.) The lesson occurs on a holiday & the streets of Jerusalem are abuzz & a prophet named Haggai finds a soapbox & lets fly. I see Haggai as a kind of street corner preacher. And he begins, "How are things going? How's your money working for you? Consider how you fare." And as people walk by it gets their attention; it stops them in their tracks. "How are things going for you? How have you fared?"

Well some have fared quite well, they live in fine home. But most of them have not fared so well. This little book reminds us that the economy of that time was mired in the doldrums with a rampant recession. And as the text reminds us money seems to be kept in a bag with holes in it, it takes a sack of dollar bills to buy a loaf of bread & the upshot of this economy is that people have lost their perspective. All they can think about is getting by & surviving. Forgotten is their responsibility to care for others. Forgotten is their

responsibility to their faith & to the larger world in which they live. They have discarded their sacred responsibilities. So the prophet says, “Consider, is your money serving you well? Where do you stand?”

Haggai’s taking inventory has to do with our balancing our checkbooks. Our checkbooks may reflect our needs, our wants, our priorities. I look at my checkbook, online now & realize I have bills to pay; Uncle Sam estimated tax payments to meet, medical expenses to pay for, an aging mother to provide for, in six years college tuition to worry about, retirement to budget for; my checkbook tells me I have needs, responsibilities. But I have more, my spiritual yearnings, my moral convictions, my priorities of a different ilk. In our text Haggai doesn’t ask us a big hairy theological question; he asks a simple everyday question, “How are you getting on? Is your money serving you well? Consider how you have fared?”

Delmar Terry was a friend of mine who helped me with Middle School Youth Group every Wednesday night for three years. I love Delmar. He would take the low key approach when the teenagers would ask him questions like, “How fast do you drive, Del?” He would say, “Oh, once I got up to 55.” He invited me to attend a funeral

service his father was conducting as moral support. I hear the Rev Fred Terry give this as part of his eulogy.

He said, "You know one thing is certain, one day we're going to die. And when we're gone they'll slap us in a box & put us in the ground & shovel dirt onto our face. Now when we're lying in that box & folks are standing around your grave, some will be crying but not for too long. They'll stand up & start drifting back to the fellowship hall for chicken & potato salad. And they're going to do a little talking. They're going to start talking about you. How you've done lived your life. What is it they're going to say about you? Are they going to talk about the titles you amassed, the trophies you collected? Or are they going to tell stories of your generous living? And the difference your life has made? Are they going to talk titles & trophies or are they going to give testimonies?"

Time & money are the sacred currencies by which we live & with those currencies we build our legacy. I look no further than that rabbi from Nazareth who knew how to live. You see we're in this together, this big old life. We ordain & install & recognize in acknowledgement of this life lived fully, abundantly together.

For the last few weeks we have been saying as our affirmation of faith the Nicene Creed & it was St John Chrysostom the Bishop of Constantinople who was a strong & unwavering supporter of this creed formulated at the Council of Nicea in 325 AD. St John Chrysostom, which is Greek for “Golden Mouth” said it very well, he said,

“The rich person is not the person who has much, the rich person is the person who gives much.”

Or as my latest email advised, “Complain less & give more.”

Amen.