

**A sermon preached by Rev. Dr. Jason Cashing, Clarence Presbyterian Church on  
October 22, 2023.**

**REVISITING THE MUSTARD SEED**

*<Exodus 33:12-23; Psalm 99:1-9; Matthew 22:15-22>*

*Prayer: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be pleasing and acceptable to you, O Holy One, our Rock and Redeemer. Amen.*

Every public speaker, especially preachers, should be listening to good story-tellers. And one of my favorites is Dr. Tony Campolo, the Baptist minister who led ministry for decades at Eastern College and went on to help found the movement known as “Red-Letter Christians,” whose focus is to take the red-lettered words of Jesus in the Gospels and live them out as closely, as accurately, and as radically as possible. Tony is an amazing speaker, whom I had the pleasure of hearing some years back at Chautauqua Institute. I found him to be a caring, compassionate, and approachable man, who emulates many of the qualities I find to be intrinsic to ministry. But he tells the story of one such occasion when he was less than understanding and patient.

Understandably, it started with an honest oversight. Tony had just arrived home to Philadelphia at 8:30 in the morning after a red-eye flight following a long conference. He was exhausted, but he was met by his assistant at the airport who informed him he needed to be taken directly to a church for a 10:00 commitment, where he was to speak to a women’s group. He was tired; the scheduling oversight was an honest mistake, but Tony was tired.

Upon arriving, one of the leaders announced that a request had come to the women’s group for \$5,000 to support the medical work of a missionary in Venezuela. She turned to Tony and, looking at him, said, “And I’m sure Dr. Campolo would be happy to pray to God for us to find a way to find that \$5,000.” To which, with exhaustion and short-temper, Tony - uncharacteristically, in his words - replied, “No.”

Over the past weeks we’ve had the joy of hearing from various church members as they’ve reflected on stewardship for us. With each one, we’ve asked them to consider the following question, “How have you seen the ministries of this congregation at work in the community, and experienced them in your own lives?” And the rationale for this is three-fold: To remind us how we, as a congregation have lived out our ministry and mission in the past; To remind us how our gifts, talents, and resources support and make this ministry possible; and To realize how such gifts, perhaps even given without too much thought week-to-week, make a bigger impact than we might realize. Similar to Jesus’ parable of the mustard seed, which we heard repeatedly over the summer, our gifts often have a greater impact and a broader reach than we might imagine.

And our volunteer speakers have done an excellent job, bringing us easily to a topic that is not always easy to address: Stewardship of gifts, and particularly the gift of money.

Money is an emotional topic in our culture today, and our cultural norms lean in the direction of money being an off-limits topic; what you earn is your business, and what you give to the church is between you and God, right?

Yes. And no.

Because Jesus makes it clear, when responding to the disciples of the Pharisees and the Herodians, that it is imperative to have a healthy relationship with all our gifts and an understanding of how those gifts should be used, including money. Perhaps even especially money.

They have come to Jesus trying to trap him in a “lose-lose” situation, in order to discredit him. The disciples of the Pharisees are there to try and indirectly lay the trap, representing the realm of religious life. The Herodians, who are staunchly anti-Roman empire and occupation, are there to make sure Jesus doesn’t give any impression that it’s ok for Caesar to rule them from afar with a heavy tax and levy. They hand him a coin, a marker and means of wealth in the eyes of the empire, with the image of Caesar upon it, and ask Jesus if it’s appropriate to pay the heavy tax that Rome imposes. They figure there’s no way he can answer correctly, and perhaps they even think that he can’t possibly even have an answer to a topic that no one is comfortable having frank and honest conversations about.

The sense is that it’s always easier to have, at best, an indirect conversation about money and giving. To imply it and leave it at a tacit understanding that everyone understands what is being implied. It’s what the women’s group expected when they called upon Dr. Campolo to pray, generally and non-specifically, for the needed \$5,000 to be found somewhere, in some way and at some time. We, however, are invited to be specific, and to be honest. We are not called in this life of faith to be vague, evasive, or wishy-washy.

Jesus calls us, even in this brief encounter, to live in such a way. I would dare say that he wants us to have healthy and open conversations about money because to do so actually enables us to more closely follow God. Furthermore, there is a recognition that all gifts, in whatever measure they have been received, are gifts from God. All gifts we give, then, reflect the gifts given from God, and our relationship with the Divine. Jesus’ response to those trying to trap him is straight-forward and clear, with an undertone that bears lifting up: “Give to Caesar what is Caesar’s, to God what is God’s” is the explicit response, with the undertone being that all things, ultimately, are God’s.

Because Caesar may have the empire, but God has the cosmos. The coins bear the image of Caesar; every facet of creation bears the imprint of the Creator, including all of humanity. All of humanity and creation belongs to the One whose image it bears. And these gifts, every one of them, can be used to build up and strengthen the ministry and mission of the Kingdom of God. That’s why the focus from our speakers this season has been centered on how the ministry of this congregation has been lived out already, because we recognize that we already have all the gifts, all the capability, all the

resources to do this, and to continue to do this, and even to expand in living out the good news of the gospel.

In this, also, is the reminder and the living out of God's promise to Moses, echoing through the ages. It was the promise of God even before Moses, first given to Abram and then Isaac and then Jacob. And it has been given, again and again, since the time of Moses, the promise that is really a gift, that God will be present with us, with the people, with those who engage in living out the good news and following where God leads.

On that fateful day when Tony Campolo refused to vaguely and generically pray for a specific need to be met, he followed up his "no" by offering an invitation. He offered to take every penny he had in his pockets and give it toward this need. He fished around and came up with \$2.25, which he laid on the table in the front. Then he encouraged and invited every other person there to do the same. "No checks," he said. "No credit. Just cash. We'll put it all on the table and then I'll happily pray for the remainder of what is needed."

Slowly and hesitantly each woman fished around in pockets and purses, and each one came forward and placed what cash they had on the table. The process, Tony reflected, took almost half an hour as each woman came forward in turn. When everyone had contributed, they counted the money on the table. The amount needed for the medical mission in Venezuela was \$5,000. The women of that gathering on that morning ended up giving \$8,000. They had been about to pray, vaguely and generically, to find money that they already had at hand. What was truly needed was the reminder, the invitation, to bring it before God and let their gift reflect their relationship with God, and to do so honestly and specifically.

Next week we will dedicate our pledges in worship. We will have the chance to come forward and place our pledge card on the table in support of the ministry and mission of this congregation. Our pledges may even seem small and insignificant in light of the overall budget, but when they come together I think we will be joyfully surprised at what we find. I invite you in this week, directly and honestly, to prayerfully consider the gifts you have received and how those gifts, offered through the church, will support the ministry of good news. For us. For our community at large. And spread into the world.

And I'll start. Here is our pledge; it is an honest reflection of the gifts we have received and our gratitude to God. Furthermore, it is our desire that these gifts, in support of the budget of this congregation, will be used to equip and enable ministry and mission through us and for the kingdom of God. Because our budget isn't just for us; it is for ministry by and through us.

I recognize I am called upon to give to God what is God's as I reflect on God's presence in my life and in this congregation. I ask you to prayerfully do the same, and undergirding it all, may we indeed be mindful of God's leading of this church in ministry, for the joy of the good news we have received. Amen.