

<Exodus 33:12-23; Psalm 99:1-9; Matthew 22:16-22>

*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.*

How do we determine the value of a thing? By that I mean, how do we determine and assess the amount of value we place on an object, and rank its importance in our lives? Is it simply by how much it costs? We all know that a minor trinket might carry a great deal of non-monetary value.

We recently visited my parents, and while there my mother and I tried to find some of the photo books from my childhood to show our daughter. Mom and I started going through plastic totes in the basement, and I realized something anew: my mother holds on to family and sentimental items. She doesn't hoard, at least not in the traditional sense, but if an item has a family connection or connects to a particular event or occasion, it remains with us. It has a story, and serves a place within the narrative history of our family. As such, it cannot easily be disposed of. My mother is now the family historian not just for her and her brother, but on behalf of my dad's family, as well. All of our historical documents have come down to her, and eventually they will all come to me.

I've offered to start going through some of these bins and items now, but my mother isn't ready to part with them. They still hold too much value for her. What she has begun to realize, however, is that if she gives them to me her conscience is clean, and then I can do whatever I want with the item, even getting rid of it. But as my wife will tell you, I am my mother's son, and I know that some day I will be the family historian and archivist. And if I know the story behind an item, I have a hard time getting rid of it, myself.

On more than one occasion I have been handed a box of items from my mom who then automatically begins to tell me what all is in the box and which family members it came from and how it was important to one of my ancestors. “Mom,” I exclaim. “Stop. I can't do anything with this if I know the story behind it.” If you tell me the value of a thing that previously had no value, then I can't get rid of it, either.

How do we value an item, and express what is its worth to us? More than that, how do we let that determined value direct and guide our attitudes and actions around that item, or even in the world?

Jesus has done something truly miraculous and even unheard of: he has brought together two political groups who had very different ideologies and perspectives on the world around them. As Professor of New Testament Raj Nadella writes, “No one would have expected the Pharisees and the Herodians to come together on the issue of taxes. The [Pharisees] opposed the Roman Empire and the [Herodians] actively worked with it, but their shared disdain for Jesus brought the two ideologically and politically opposed groups together” (*Working Preacher*).

Their shared plot was to try to trap Jesus, literally, in his own words, catching him in a no-win soundbite that could be used to undo him, either through the religious leadership or through the civic nation-state of Rome.

Jesus, however, refuses to answer in such a way. Asking for the coin of the realm, he has these two antithetical groups answer instead, reflecting some of their own values.

When I first began college, I tried out diving to see if it was a sport I wanted to pursue. I knew next to nothing about the actual mechanics of diving and I was afraid I didn't have the coordination. But the coach broke it down for me. “Your body is going to go wherever your head goes, and your head is going to go in the direction of wherever your eyes go. What you're looking toward, that is where your body ultimately will go.”

Jesus was metaphorically asking his own question: ‘where are the eyes of your heart looking?’

Moses was also redetermining where the eyes of his heart looked. He and God has discussed and debated much. He and the people of Israel had gone through much together, emotional highs and lows. And now, as we begin to draw toward the close of Moses's part of the story, we join him with God up on the mountain again, hammering out some of the fundamentals of what will be the covenantal story, the covenantal relationship moving forward. And Moses tells God, “if your presence will not go [with us], do not bring us up from here. For how shall it be known that I have found favor in your sight, I and your people, unless you go with us?”

In other words, ‘none of this will have been worth it if you will not go with us. If you will not let the eyes of our hearts be turned toward you. The value of this experience, of this journey, of this covenant will be empty if you, yourself, are not present for the eyes of our hearts to behold and uplift. It is not enough to know of your glory with our heads or our understandings; your glory must be an intimate, integral part of our hearts if this is going to work.’

And then Moses asks for the concrete living out of this promise, that his own eyes might fully behold the glory of God, upholding Moses and filling his life, his experiences and even his future with value. God, as we read, acquiesces, though with a caveat, for none may behold the full glory of God and live.

At a first glance, we may wonder why these two readings have been placed together by the creators of the Revised Common Lectionary, that agreed upon resource for churches as we make our way through the gospel stories. But as we place them more side-by-side, we begin to see it a little bit better. It was never about the taxes; that was the man-made bait to try and trap Jesus. But it was never about the taxes; it was about where we place our value and how we uphold those values.

Jesus was trying to remind the Pharisees, and perhaps even teach the Herodians, what they should have remembered and known all along from their Torah studies of Moses: the covenantal life was about holding the value of God's promise and presence foremost in all of our living. This lesson of Jesus concludes with the dual warning and reminder to keep, at our highest value, the presence of God in our lives, and in the lives of those around us.

But still there is more. Because the other side of that proverbial coin is the reminder of the value we hold in God's eyes. The world as we know it, as we have created it and as we live within it, the world will attempt to assign values to us, and those values will always undervalue us. Give to Caesar what is Caesar's, yes, but more than that, give to God what is God's. And the fullness of our abundant lives, both as individuals and as communities, is of inestimable value in God's eyes.

How do we assess and assign value to anything in this world? By first fixing the eyes of our hearts again upon the glory of God upheld, the fullness of the covenantal relationship in our lives, and then letting everything else fall into place behind it. The more we behold God's glory,

the more we will be able to truly value everything and everyone else, for we will see it all more clearly in the way that God sees it all.

The Lord has promised to go before us, that the Divine Presence may go along with us. As we turn the eyes of our hearts again to God, may we again determine the values of our hearts, and remember that there is only one thing to value first. Let us render unto God that which belongs to God: all that we are. In this, we find our fullest value, ourselves, and we live into the glory of God upheld. Amen.

*(Sermon preached by Rev. Dr. Jason Cashing at Clarence Presbyterian Church)*