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Lent 3 C – March 20, 2022

“Coins”

Read: Matthew 26: 6 - 16/ Memorize Matthew 26: 15

When I was growing up there were these things called phone booths, which contained payphones. You put money in the slot and called people. If the line was busy or they didn't answer, you would get your money back, in a different coin slot. Sometimes, people would be in a rush and walk away before the coins returned, so you would always want to check out the coin return slot for change.

Our relationship with money has always been a little difficult. It can be a wonderful blessing or a curse. People often think having a lot is the blessing; lacking is the curse. That's not totally true. There are poor people who feel very blessed and rich people who feel very cursed.

Jesus talks more about money and possessions than any other topic. In our book, *Lent In Plain Sight* by Jill Duffield, I got an interesting insight about the story of the Widow's mites or coins. Most pastors, including me, have used that story to teach about sacrificial giving. Often emphasizing that one of the goals of giving is to help in the transformation that God is seeking to bring about in our lives. The love affair many have with money can get in the way of that transformation.

Jill's insight was really powerful to me. Giving in the temple was not a private affair. Where you placed your offering was in plain sight and everybody could see what you were giving. Jesus' point was that it's less about "how much" and more about the "who." The whole purpose of offering gifts to God is to remember that God cares. He always cares through the ministry of people.

When we see those in need and do nothing, we are forgetting that they are precious to God and should be to us. If we offer our gifts to God on Sunday, but neglect those in need during the week, we have lost sight of the second part of the great commandment: "love your neighbor as you love yourself."

I can't tell you how many times people have commented on the atmosphere they feel when they come to Good Shepherd. They often remark that they are impressed by the feelings of care. It's something for which Good Shepherd is noted. It makes people feel precious to God.

Talk about a lack of caring, the story of the Cleansing of the temple appears in all four Gospels. On the surface, the market could seem caring. People had to come to the temple to make their sacrifices, which were offerings of animals. Just imagine that you had to bring a bull, lamb or other animal from miles away. Why not make it easier on people?

So the nice people in Jerusalem decided to set up a market right inside the temple so you could buy whatever you needed for your sacrifice. They even had places to change your money because you weren't allowed to use that dirty Roman money in the Temple. You wanted to have temple coinage that was clean, crisp and not defiled by some graven image. What's the big deal about this? They're making it easier for people to come to temple. Sounds pretty caring, doesn't it?

There were two problems: First, they set up the market in the Court of the Gentiles, the largest part of the temple. It was the place for those who were not Jewish to come and learn about God. The market in that Court showed their lack of care for God's plan to bring all the nations to Him.

The second problem we're probably more familiar with. Have you ever been to an amusement park or a sporting event? It seems like everything is more expensive there. Why is that? Because you're a captive audience.

The sellers in the Jerusalem market cheated people, plain and simple, and the temple officials took a cut of it. They took advantage of people who were coming to worship God. They were abusing the community of the faithful and that really made Jesus angry.

Here's the implication for us as Christians. We may not cheat people at church but Jesus is just as concerned about what we do beyond the walls of church. How we earn and use our coins is important to Him. Our Christian values are not just for our Christian time or friends. They are to be the values that we carry over into our lives. It's not only about how we treat those we know. It is to include those we don't know, irrespective of race, color, gender or any other difference.

God wants us to use our coins to help people, just as we did last week for the Ukraine. We received over \$1,600. The coins this week are for those who are immigrants to our country, that they also have an opportunity to see their lives changed. The Israelites returned to Jerusalem after its destruction, to rebuild it. Coins, freely given, contained the power to cast a vision and shape future generosity. We're accomplishing the same goal.

We see it as we watch Afghan families now and, perhaps Ukrainian families someday, arrive here in the United States. Immigrant families are part of the treasure God has given us. They bring treasured things but they also bring one vital treasure, their desire and appreciation for freedom. Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Services is the arm of our church that helps those new to our land get established and succeed. Our gifts, like the ones we offered last week through Lutheran World Relief, will help to change lives.

Finally, we know that coins can lift up or tear down. A woman came to the home of a man named Simon. She snuck in to get close to Jesus. She began to pour an incredibly expensive perfume over His head. The disciples objected, saying that the perfume could have been sold and the money used to help the poor. Jesus stopped them. She was doing what was needed to prepare Him for burial, He said.

The story doesn't end there. Matthew tells us of another player in this drama. His name is Judas. He is appalled also, but not because of who it could help, but that it denied him access to her gift. You see, Judas was the treasurer of the group. He was also a thief.

After he sees this woman spread the perfume on Jesus he goes to the high priest to say that he is willing to betray Jesus. The price arrived at is thirty pieces. So Judas sold his very Lord into death for a pittance, while the woman brought a precious gift to Jesus because He was precious to her.

To Judas, Jesus was not precious. Jill gives us an insight on that. She suggests that Judas thought little of Jesus because he thought little of himself. Why else would he rob from the very Son of God and betray Him? Judas' lack of care for himself reminds us of an important issue. It's hard to love others, when you don't love yourself.

Before we become too appalled at Judas, we may want to consider what our relationship to Jesus and money is. As Jill says, “Whatever our family system, our relationship to money cannot help but be complicated. Our consumerist culture relentlessly attempts to persuade us that nothing trumps the value of wealth and status of money.

We think we’ve earned it and deserve it. God wants us to give to others. We often think God doesn’t know what the real world is like. He has never lived in it, but then we remember that He has. He came as the God-man, Jesus. We like to think our betrayals are not our fault. However, the Lenten season asks us to stop and pray. Have we, in fact, sold our soul for a quarter; turned over our integrity for a handful of coins?

Will we invest our treasure where moth and rust don’t get in or will we try to hoard it for ourselves, while losing our lives? As Jill says, “The Messiah’s relentless, priceless, not-for-sale mission is redemption. We may sell our soul for a quarter, but Jesus buys it back with His life. We are precious to Him, so precious that He gave Himself for us so that we might not live eternally separated from Him.”

Here’s your question: How will you use “coins” to help those in need?