

10-1-17 Sermon “Skin in the Game: God Asks for Our Treasure – Matthew 21:23-32

A father has two sons, and he asks both of them to spend a day working in his vineyard. The first son says he won't go, but then changes his mind and goes to work in the vineyard. The second son agrees to go, but then never does. Which son, in the end, does the will of his father?

We've heard several of Jesus' parables in recent months. The parable of the sower who sows wastefully, the parables of the yeast and the mustard seed that grow to infiltrate normal life with holy weeds, the parable of the laborers in the vineyard with the not-so-fair pay scale. Each one has twists and turns and surprises that disrupt our usual ways of thinking so that we can hear the strange, new message of Jesus. And then this week, we get the parable of the two sons.

The only surprising thing about this parable is that there's nothing surprising about it! It's very straightforward, almost unsettlingly so. We know the moral of this story, don't we? Actions speak louder than words. Or as Jesus said, in the Sermon on the Mount: “Not everyone who says to me, “Lord, Lord”, will enter the Kingdom of Heaven, but only those people who do the will of my Father.”

It's pretty basic, Christianity 101 kind of material, and we hear it time and time again in the teachings of our faith. “Faith without works is dead,” says James, in his epistle. St. Francis of Assisi has famously summed it up, “Preach the Gospel at all times. If necessary, use words.”

Even our secular culture has no shortage of sayings and aphorisms that reinforce the message of this parable. “Don't just talk the talk,” we say, “Walk the walk.” “Actions speak louder than words.” “Get some skin in the game.” “Put your money where your mouth is.”

It's appropriate, and somewhat serendipitous, that this parable is the lectionary reading on the first Sunday of our Season of Stewardship here at First Presbyterian Church. Because Stewardship Season is, in short, a time when we practice putting our money where our mouth is. We reflect on the ways God has blessed us and others through the ministry of this church. We pray and discern where God might be calling us to dedicate more of ourselves and our resources to the church's ministry. And on commitment Sunday, November 19th, we offer our pledges for the coming year and pray that God will use them for the work of God's Kingdom. We pray that the gifts of our money will bring this world a little closer to being “on earth, as it is in Heaven.”

Of course, stewardship is not just about money. There is much that we can and do offer to God that can't be configured in dollars and cents. And during this season, we will think about how we can creatively use not only our money, our “treasure”, but also our talents and our time to further the work of God's Kingdom on earth.

But today we are talking about money, because money matters. As Jesus taught his disciples, “Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” I don't think that saying is a threat, as some have interpreted it: it's just a statement of fact. The way we spend our money shows us, in a very concrete way, what is important to us.

And even beyond that, I think the way that we give away our money shows us what we are really excited, really passionate about. For most of us, I would imagine, the majority of our money goes to the necessities of life: food, clothing, housing, medical expenses...you know the list as well as I do. But when we do find ourselves with more money than we need to just stay afloat – whether it's one dollar or one thousand dollars – I think many of us *do* feel that tug in our hearts to give it away, to share our treasure, to put that money into something that matters. Maybe we give to a loved one who is having a hard time making ends meet. Maybe we give to an organization or a cause we believe in. There's something within our hearts – call it our conscience, call it the Holy Spirit – that makes us want to be part of something bigger than

ourselves, something that makes our hearts feel whole, something that allows us to leave this world better than we found it.

But then again, there are plenty of places these days to put our money where our mouth is. Plenty of groups and organizations doing good and important work. Kingdom work, even. In a town brimming with non-profits, in a world full of organizations doing the works of justice, compassion, and peace in this world, why labor in this particular vineyard? I think it's a fair question to ask: In the year 2017, why give money to the church?

I've been asking myself this question this week, and I find that my mind keeps drifting back to the first time I had enough money to make a regular financial contribution to my church. I remember feeling the strangest sort of joy. I wasn't making a lot of money, so I had to keep a pretty close watch on the bank account. And my offering was by no means enormous; it was not going to make any great ripples in the church budget. But there was something almost exhilarating about making that commitment, turning in my pledge card, and offering what I could to the work of the Kingdom in that particular church.

You see, that church was a place where I had experienced grace. When I walked through the doors of that faith community, it was abundantly clear to me why we still do this strange thing called church. Why some 2,000 years after a man named Jesus was crucified, we still show up on Sunday mornings to sing his praises and read Scripture and break bread together and proclaim that He is Risen, and He is Lord.

This community of faith changed me in profound ways that I still struggle to put into words. It was a community that held both my husband Andy and myself in love and in grace. That taught us and challenged us, laughed with us and cried with us. In that community of faith, God transformed us into more faithful disciples, and into people who knew from the ground of our being that we were loved, by God and by that great cloud of witnesses who surrounded us. And experiencing that, I didn't want to just show up for worship. I wanted to be physically and financially invested in that community. Because I knew there was grace and transformation within those walls. And when it comes to grace, I want some skin in the game.

Have you had that kind of experience before? Are there places in your life where you have received the free, baffling gift of grace? Experiences that touch your heart, and bring you to life? Places and communities that change you, so much so that when you leave, you are somehow different than you walked in the door. Places that continue to change you, because wherever you go and whatever you do, you can't help but reflect that grace you have experienced.

I've been feeling some of that same strange excitement and joy as I've gone through my budget for next year and prepared to increase my own pledge to this congregation. It's a bizarre feeling; I don't know how else to describe it, except to say that there is something profoundly joyful about challenging myself – pinching my pennies a little – in order to invest in something that matters so much to me. There is something that feels almost holy about that kind of sacrifice, something deeply rewarding and meaningful about getting some skin in the game.

So, in the year 2017, why give to the church? Why give to this church?

I can't answer that question for you, but I can tell you what the answer looks like for me. In the nine months I have spent with you so far, I have seen first-hand that First Presbyterian Church of Taos is a place where people are touched by grace. I have seen you all extend that grace to one another, and to people in the larger Taos community. I've seen you welcome children, and feed people who are hungry, and spend time caring for and listening to people who are homeless. I've seen you show up for each other when you are sick or grieving, when you

need a warm meal or a warm smile to help you make it through the day. I've heard you ask after each other, heard you pray not only for yourselves and your loved ones, but also for other members of this church and community.

In these nine months, I've also had the joy and blessing of being instrument of that grace alongside you. I've seen the Holy Spirit at work, as many of you have told me that things I've said in sermons have touched your lives in ways I never could have planned for or imagined. I've heard worshipers say they experience an energy in this congregation that they haven't encountered in church in a long, long time. Visitors have come up after worship and told me that they can tell this is a special place, that God is present here. And all I can do is smile and agree.

And, perhaps most powerfully of all, I have personally experienced the power of grace in this place. I've messed up, and you've forgiven me. I've felt sad and lonely, and you've lifted my spirits. I've felt joy, and you've celebrated and shared that joy with me. I came into this church and you welcomed me, essentially a stranger, into your lives and homes and hearts. You've shared with me the things that bring you joy and grief, hope and fear, not because I had done anything to earn that intimacy, but simply because you trusted in the power of grace.

And friends, this kind of community is something I want to be a part of. When it comes to grace, I want some skin in the game.

At the end of the day, I wonder if that's what's going on with the first son in the parable. His response intrigues me. He's already told his father no, already refused to work in the vineyard. But then, Jesus tells us, he changes his mind and goes anyway. And I can't help but wonder...what on earth made him do that?

I wonder if maybe the son who says no discovers that there's grace in the vineyard. I wonder if he, like me and perhaps like you, finds himself unexpectedly immersed in the grace of unconditional love and acceptance. He refused his father's request, and perhaps he expected a lecture. And I can't help but wonder if something changed in him, if he was somehow transformed, when instead he heard his father softly say, "Ok, then. I wish you would work in the vineyard. But no matter what you do, you are still my son, my beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

There is nothing more powerful than being touched by grace. And there is nothing like that taste of grace to make us want to give something of our own in return. Because when it comes to grace, I truly believe that we all want some skin in the game. So, God help us, let's do it.