

Summary:

“Looking Back,” the first in a three-part series titled, “It’s a Wonder-full Life,” by Rev. Jay Anderson at Church of the Master United Methodist, Westerville, OH, Sunday, November 10, 2019.

Detail:

It's a Wonderful Life, originally made for Liberty Films, is one of the most popular and heartwarming films ever made by director Frank Capra. Capra regarded this film as his personal favorite - it was also James Stewart's favorite of all his feature films.

The film's screenplay was based on "The Greatest Gift," an original short story first written on a Christmas card by Philip Van Doren Stern.

The film was actually a box-office flop at the time of its release, and only became *the* Christmas movie classic in the 1970s due to repeated television showings at Christmas-time when its copyright protection slipped and it fell into the public domain in 1974, allowing TV stations to air it for free. Republic Pictures later restored its copyright claim to the film in 1993, so currently, it can be shown only on the NBC-TV network.

It’s actually a dark, bittersweet post-war tale of a savings-and-loan manager who struggles against a greedy banker and his own self-doubting nature in a small town named Bedford Falls.

Earnest do-gooder George Bailey, played by James Stewart, recognizes his life as wonderful and truly rich only after suffering many hardships, mishaps and fateful trials. He is given encouragement by a whimsical, endearing, trainee-angel named Clarence, who is sent from above to help the discouraged George Bailey.

The “looking back” aspect of the story - connecting it to our message title today - occurs when, in a Dickensian *A Christmas Carol* twist, the hysterical, despairing, and melancholy family man is shown what the small town (Bedford Falls, now renamed Pottersville after the town's evil tycoon) would be like without him.

It's a frightening, nightmarish, view of the world (at Christmas-time) that brings George back from self-destruction. He returns to the idyllic, small-town world that he left, with renewed faith and confidence in life itself. Hence, the film's title: *It's a Wonderful Life*.

In our scripture lesson for today, we find Jesus in Jerusalem, only a couple of days after his entrance into the city on what we now know as Palm Sunday.

Amidst the cheers, the praise, the loud “Hosannas” the waving palm branches and all, Jesus’ followers must have been thinking, as they looked back over three years of ministry with Jesus, they were living a wonderful life as well. Here they were, marching in with the most popular guy in town - part of the in-crowd. Jesus knows better, but the disciples are caught up in the hoopla.

Nevertheless, riding this wave of popular acclaim, Jesus immediately enters the Temple and overthrows the tables of the money-changes, challenging both the political and religious powers that be. Confronted by the religious leaders regarding the authority behind his actions, Jesus tells several provocative, even threatening parables calling into question their own authority and, indeed, their standing before God.

It's for this reason that two groups that normally wanted little to do with each other – the Herodians, who derived their power from the Roman occupiers, and the Pharisees, who were aligned more closely

with the occupied and oppressed commoners but who were strict religious “law and order” types – declare a temporary truce in order to work together to trap this upstart rabbi.

So they pose a question to him, a very clever question, they think, asking Jesus whether it was lawful to pay the imperial tax. This tax, it should be noted, is the tax that funded the Roman occupation of Israel. The people were being ordered to pay the tax that supported their own oppression. Should the people, they inquire, pay the tax that funds their very oppressors?

Should Jesus answer in the affirmative, the adoration of the crowds would likely not simply evaporate, but rather be turned into opposition.

Should he answer negatively, however, then he will have positioned himself over and against the Romans, never a wise thing to do. So they’ve got him trapped - stuck between the proverbial rock and hard place.

And that will serve as our cliffhanger of sorts.

We’ll circle back to this in a moment to discuss how he extricates himself from this ticklish situation.

But first, I want to lay out for your consideration three other small scripture passages to help shape our thinking about the primary passage from Matthew.

The first is a snippet from passages found in both Exodus and Deuteronomy, the Ten Commandments.

And we'll make this a little fun - we'll do it as a Bible Bowl contest. The first to call out the correct answer wins.

In the Ten Commandments, what is the first commandment?

The King James For The 21st Century translation words it this way:

"Thou shalt have no other gods before me." (Exod. 20:3)

What is the second?

"Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above...thou shalt not bow down to them nor serve them..."(Exod. 20:4-5)

Good. Keep those in mind as I share two other passages with you to help guide our thinking.

The first of these is from the Book of Psalms, number 24, verse 1, which reads,

"The earth is the Lord's and everything in it, the world and its inhabitants too."

That's pretty straightforward, easily understood, right? Everything, EVERYTHING, belongs to God.

The earth, everything in or on the earth - so God has the mineral rights and the rights to the airspace above - and all of its inhabitants - animal, vegetable, and mineral. Human, non-human, flying things, crawling things, swimming things, EVERYTHING that walks, talks, squawks, eats, breathes, everything that EXISTS belongs to God. Nothing you can see, hear, feel, smell, or taste DOES NOT belong to God.

Even the things you THINK belong to YOU, actually belong to God. Hmm. That poses a bit of a challenge to our god of materialism doesn't it?

The last passage I want to offer for your consideration before we get back to Jesus' cliffhanger moment is this verse, Genesis 1:26, which reads,

“Then God said, ‘*Let us make humanity in our image to resemble us so that they make take charge of the fish of the sea, the birds in the sky, the livestock, all the earth, and all the crawling things on earth.*’”

And then continuing into the first part of verse 27,

“*God created humanity in God's own image, in the divine image God created them...*”

So you're with me so far, right? The very first book of the Bible tells us right out of the gate - 26 verses in - that humanity is created in the image of God, to resemble God...and in the divine image God created us. Pretty clear - God doesn't look like us, but we're made in the image, the likeness, of God.

Psalms 24 tells us that EVERYTHING in the known and unknown universe belongs to God, and the first two of the Ten Commandments tell us we're to have no other gods and we're not to have any graven images or idols that we use, worship or as gods. Got all that...

Meanwhile, back in Jerusalem, Jesus patiently waits for us to come back and see how he gets himself out of this trap - or at least what the Pharisees and Herodians think is a trap. Because if their question is clever, Jesus' response is ingenious or, more appropriately, inspired, leading to an exchange that is as revealing as it is brief. After asking if

any of his antagonists has a coin of the Empire – the only coin that could be used to pay the tax in question – they quickly provide one. Jesus asks whose image is on it - they answer “Caesar’s.”

Now there’s more going on here than meets the eye. Along with the engraved image on the coin is a declaration of Caesar’s divinity. Use of the coin means the implicit, if not explicit, acknowledgement that Caesar is a god. Therefore any Jew holding and using the coin is breaking the first two commandments - thou shalt have NO other gods, and thou shalt have no graven images, no idols. And it is the Pharisees, the ones who insist that everyone adhere strictly to even the tiniest letter of the Law, who in fact provide this idolatrous coin, seeking to trap the Son of God. All of which leads to Jesus’ closing line, “Give therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s.”

And with this one sentence, Jesus not only evades their trap and confounds their plans, but issues a challenge to his hearers that reverberates through the ages and into our sanctuary today as well.

As I read this story I kept thinking about that verse from the opening chapter of Genesis: “Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness.” Likeness – the Greek word *ikon* – is the word used in the Septuagint, the Greek translation of Genesis and is also the word Matthew chooses. So a better translation of v. 20 in Matthew, rather than the word *image*, is, “Whose likeness is this?” I don’t know how many of Jesus’ audience would have caught that, but I suspect those listening closely to Jesus’ word choice would have harkened back to God’s initial pronouncement and promise: We bear God’s likeness and are therefore made to be more than we sometimes realize.

Let that sink in. We are made in the image and likeness of God, and because we bear God's likeness we are to act, not like the world around us, but more like God.

Not mind you, like gods, like those who lord their authority over others for self-gain, but rather like God – the One who creates and sustains and nurtures and redeems and gives and saves...no matter the cost.

We are called into partnership with God, as the earthly hands and feet of God, to exercise dominion over creation - not as an act of power but rather as an act of stewardship - extending to everyone the abundant life God wishes for all.

Notice that despite the fact that Jesus' opponents carry a coin with a graven image and confession of Caesar's divinity, Jesus accuses them of neither blasphemy nor disloyalty. Rather, he calls them hypocrites.

The word hypocrite comes from a Greek word meaning *mask*. He says the Pharisees and Herodians have quite literally taken on another, a false, likeness.

Before we are too quick to vilify the Pharisees though, we should remember that they were just average church people like us who, like us, had their thoughts, ideas, and beliefs about who and how one must be in order to be a good God-follower. Perhaps a better way to think about those trying to entrap or discount Jesus then or now is best understood as amnesia, for they have forgotten who they are, in whose likeness they were made.

They've forgotten who, and whose, they are, for

"The earth is the Lord's and everything in it, the world and its inhabitants too."

The opportunity in this passage, along with the smaller passages that help us better understand Jesus' message here, is to call us back to our primary identity as children of God and as stewards, as those who are made in the likeness of God and called, even charged, to act like the God we see in Jesus.

As one writer put it,

“When we hold up the values we see Jesus live (he didn't even have a coin with Caesar's image on it in his pocket), we make space for the variety of voices and contributions of our people, we look for God's work beyond our community and the places we normally expect God to be, and we call each other back to God's word and promise and charge that we are made in God's own image and likeness and are therefore called to live in a way that others may detect the family resemblance.”

These passages also leave us with questions with which to wrestle: Is Jesus saying that we owe nothing to a false god like Caesar and should reserve all things for God?

I don't know. Or is he inviting us to recognize that while we may, in fact, owe the emperors and their empires in this world some things -- like taxes -- we owe God other things -- like our whole selves?

Or is Jesus instead inviting us to avoid giving our allegiance to, that is, making idols of, the material and temporal things of this world that our coins can buy and demanding that our ultimate devotion go to God?

Those are the questions with which we're compelled to wrestle.

So what does all of this mean? Or, more to the point, how should our faith actually shape our daily decisions, particularly our economic ones?

As it turns out, this can be incredibly tricky business. More than that, as disciples of Jesus Christ, we likely think about these things a fair amount.

For some it's a question of how much to spend on themselves or give away, while for others it's a desire to pass on their values about money to their kids.

Whatever their questions, however, almost everyone wrestles with this stuff. And while some folks feel it's improper to talk about money in church, that's what Jesus talked about more than anything except the Kingdom of God. So we have to talk about it as well.

It seems like the only time we talk about money in church is when we're asking people to give some to the church. So this Sunday I want to reverse that trend and impression by asking you to wrestle with what Jesus says by asking, "What do you think Jesus means?"

What things are Caesar's and what are God's?

How does our faith shape our economic decisions -- our buying, saving, giving, and the rest?

And looking back over our lifetimes of dealing with money, what is it from our past that has shaped our thinking about how we live, spend, and give in the present?" And if there are questions you have about the relationship between faith and money, write them on a prayer card

and drop them in the offering plate - I'll see if I can address some of them.

Honestly, I don't believe that Jesus is advocating a full-scale retreat from the economic and political dimensions of our lives but instead is helping us to recognize that all of these things are part of God's divine economy - an economy, not of scarcity as the emperors and empires would have us believe, but an economy of abundance.

That is, I think Jesus invites us -- actually, demands of us -- that we be thinking regularly and relentlessly about how all of our decisions -- what we buy, who we vote for, how we spend our time -- should be shaped by the confession that, indeed, the whole world is God's and everything in it -- including us - the beloved children of God made in the image and likeness of this God of abundance. Or thought of another way, when we look in the mirror, who do we see - a child of God or a child of empire? Amen.