

Homily for October 18th, 2020 – 29th Sunday in Ordinary Time

You have all heard the expression “Money talks.” I heard a good one-liner the other day that said, “Money talks, all mine says is good bye.” It was true in Biblical times and is probably even more true now that “money talks.” When you have money, you can buy your way out of certain situations that a poor person cannot. When you have money, you can influence a situation in ways that you could not if you did not have money. I’m not simply talking about people who have become presidents or prime ministers; I’m talking about all of us. Just that fact that we have a few dollars in the bank, and are not rich, is enough to give us choices poor people do not have and probably never will. Buying a winter coat is not big deal unless you don’t have the money to buy a winter coat.

So, while money talks and is a great influencer in society especially in a capitalist society, our faith tells us that God is still in charge. God can use money or poverty to bring about the Kingdom. God can and does use the powerful and the weak to bring about justice. God can and does use the educated and the uneducated to bring about overdue social change. God can and does use faithful church-goers and the un-churched to spread charity, compassion and mercy to the needy of our world. God does not cause pandemics, but God can and does use things like pandemics to tell us that maybe, just maybe, the economy and money are not the most important things on this planet.

God has been using, from the very beginning, unlikely events and unlikely people to bring about God’s purpose for humanity. We hear about an unlikely ally in the first reading from the Prophet Isaiah. A pagan, Persian king named Cyrus, who owes nothing to the Jewish people, liberates the Jewish people who were held captive for 50 years by the Babylonians. They are allowed to go back to Judah, their home country, as free citizens. This non-Jewish king is used by God to do something great for the Jews, God’s chosen people.

At every moment in our lives, we are giving over our allegiance to something or someone. Why not let it be God? In the Gospels, there is a story of pagan centurion whose servant is dying. This non-Jew comes to Jesus and asks Jesus to cure his servant. He doesn’t insist that Jesus go out of his way to actually go to his house. He tells Jesus, “Just say the word and your word, I believe, will be more than enough to cure my servant. I want to give my allegiance and my servant over to you authority.” He recognized that we all, at every moment including this moment, are giving ourselves over to an authority. Why not let it be God? As a centurion he expected soldiers under him to obey his word. As a centurion, he is putting himself under God’s word and will obey whatever Jesus tells him. This centurion is a lot like Persian king Cyrus, a willing instrument in God’s hands. The centurion’s servant is healed and Jesus says of the centurion, ***“I have never seen such faith in all of Israel.”***

God has always used those who open themselves to being used. Clay in a potter's hand that is not pliable, soft, malleable, and flexible but is hardened and rigid cannot be used to make anything. All the Saints had that one thing in common—they allowed themselves to be used by God. God didn't want their talents, their riches, their abilities, but God wanted their love and willingness. In short, God wanted them.

You know, I have heard this gospel story of the coin with Caesar's image on it since I was a child and have preached on it numerous times in the past 25 years. Yet, it's only this time that a seemingly insignificant sentence jumped out at me. As the Pharisees and Herodians, two groups that actually hate each other, tag team to plot against Jesus, Jesus says, ***"Show me the coin used for the tax."*** That's the line that jumps out at me. Jesus has to ask for a coin. And there is a very good reason why he has to ask for a coin. He does not have one. Jesus is a beggar. Yes, our Savior was a beggar. Caesar wants your money; God wants your love. If you don't believe me, look at all the ways you are enticed to buy things in the world of advertisement. It's easier to hand over money than love. It's easier to hand over money, even though I do it reluctantly because I don't know if you will buy drugs or alcohol with it, than it is for me to spend time with you. Love will always be inconvenient. Jesus has no money in his pockets. He has to ask for a coin. But what he does have is something more precious than money; he has time. He gives his time, the gift of himself to others.



A few years ago, I had the privilege of being on pilgrimage in Assisi, Italy, the place we all associate with St. Francis of Assisi. During some free time, while most of the group spent prayerful time before Francis' tomb in a basement chapel, I wandered off to a room that I think was off limits. All around the walls of this room were glassed-in showcases displaying artifacts of Francis. There, spread out in its full length, was the frock that Francis wore, still intact 700 years

later. Francis's frock, as I expected was full of patches, signifying his poverty and his total dependence on God to provide him his daily bread. Francis once said, "Christ was a beggar, and I want to be a beggar too." The frock was deliberately made with no pockets. Francis had no place to store any worldly goods including money. He, like Jesus, would have had to borrow a coin to make a point. St. Francis had no money to give to others, but he gave himself, so much so that we are still drawing inspiration from this beggar 700 years later.

Every year, during the 50 days following Easter Sunday, the Church gives us readings to proclaim from the book called the Acts of the Apostles; they are stories of the birth of the Church and its struggles during its first years. Here's a little story that connects for me the birth of the Church, St. Francis of Assisi, and today's gospel about the coin that Jesus had to borrow.

It goes like this: ***Before the titles, Peter was walking along the street when, as you may recall from the book of Acts (3:6), a lame man begged alms, and Peter famously replied, "Silver and gold I have none, but what I do have I can give: in the name of Jesus Christ, rise up and walk." And the man did. Centuries later, after all the titles had been added, a poor monk traveled to Rome and interviewed Pope Julius II, who showed him the vast riches and priceless treasures of the Church. The amazed monk was shown room after room filled with treasures of art, sculpture, jewels, gold and silver. The proud pope said to the monk, "You see, my friend, the successor of Peter does not have to say, 'Silver and gold I have none.'" "Yes, Holy Father," replied the monk, "but by the same token, he can no longer say, 'In the name of Jesus Christ, rise up and walk.'"***

When we puzzle Jesus' words ***"Give therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's,"*** we realize, only with age and wisdom, that everything ultimately is God's and always was God's. Caesar wants your money; God wants your love. When we can learn to walk through life with open hands, not fearful of losing the things we cling to but trusting daily bread will be placed in those open hands, then we can walk by faith and not by sight. We will no longer need pockets on our garments for we'll finally know where our true treasure lies.

Fr. Phil