

Twenty-first Sunday after Pentecost
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Trinity Episcopal Church • New Orleans, LA

The Rev. Lex Breckinridge

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be always acceptable in your sight, oh Lord, our strength and our Redeemer.

Well, you've heard a good bit of talk about the economy from this pulpit over the last few Sundays, and I'm sure you're eager to hear more. Certainly top of mind these days, inflation's taking a bigger bite out of our paychecks or our retirement accounts, and that's just the beginning.

I won't go down the list because we're all living in it. There's a reason that economics is called the dismal science. I mentioned a couple of Sundays ago that economics is the social science that studies how we choose to allocate scarce resources.

Resources like time, money, and materials are limited, but human wants are unlimited. In other words, economics is the science of scarcity. So our human economy presumes scarcity, and that's what we're feeling right now is scarcity, which is ironic because the current inflationary period notwithstanding, we live in the most abundant economy the world has ever known.

But abundance isn't the narrative we hear. We hear the narrative of scarcity, and we internalize it, keeps us up at night. Instead of giving thanks for all we have, we get anxious about what we don't have.

At least lots of us do. For lots of us, our glass is mostly half empty and not half full. And you know who's acutely aware of this? Jesus.

Because anxiety about money isn't unique to our time and place. It's part of the human condition. The same 2,000 years ago as it is today.

Now here's an interesting statistic for you. Did you know that in the Gospels, Jesus has more to say about money than any other subject besides the kingdom of heaven? That's right. Jesus was very interested in our relationship to money, and as we'll see in a moment, how our relationship to money gets in the way of our experiencing the abundance of the kingdom of heaven.

Now we should recognize, as Jesus did, that money itself is just a commodity. It's just a thing. Money is neither the key to everlasting happiness or the root of all evil.

It's just a thing. It's the energy we put into money, the power we invest in money, the hold that money has over us that Jesus is interested in. Let me give you a couple of examples.

In Luke's Gospel, a man came to Jesus and asks him to tell his brother to share his inheritance with him. Jesus refuses and then turns to the crowd and says, be on guard against all kinds of greed for one's life does not consist in an abundance of possessions. Jesus then goes on to tell the story of a rich man whose land has produced an abundant harvest, more than his current barns could hold.

But instead of sharing this abundance, the man decides to tear down his barns and build more and bigger barns so he can store all of his abundance and keep it for himself. Then the man tells himself he can go off and eat and drink and be merry. That's where that phrase comes from, to eat and drink and be merry.

But here's the twist. God says, fool, on this very night your life will be demanded of you and all your possessions will go to someone else. Jesus then observes, so it is for those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich towards God.

Apparently it's not being rich toward ourselves that matters in this life, it's being rich towards God. Now you might also remember the story of the rich young man in Mark's gospel who comes to Jesus with a very sincere question. Good teacher, he asked, what must I do to inherit the kingdom of heaven? Jesus looks at him with love, we're told, and tells him that the first step is to keep all the commandments

and Jesus then lists all the commandments and the young man says, well I've kept all the commandments since I was a boy.

That's good, says Jesus. Then go and sell everything you have, give it to the poor and you will find treasure in heaven. Then come and follow me.

The rich young man couldn't do it. He went away shocked and grieving, Jesus says, because he had many possessions. Jesus then turns to his friends and tells them that it's easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of heaven.

Now why is that do you think? Well not because there's any inherent problem with being rich. I mean folks with wealth do lots of great things for other people all the time and the world's filled with generous and open-hearted people both rich and poor. The problem becomes when we attach our safety and security, when we attach our salvation to what we own.

When we do that we're looking for love in all the wrong places, as the old song says. That anxiety blocks us from our experience of the kingdom. I first heard a provocative question from this very pulpit about 40 years ago.

Are you possessed by your possessions? Hill Riddle asked. I've heard that question a bunch of times since and I always have to stop and admit that there's a lot of truth in it. I know I'm possessed by my possessions when I'm looking to my stuff to save me.

When I think I'll find salvation in how many barns I own or how full they are. That's why Jesus spent so much time talking about money. Jesus wants the kingdom for us and he's very clear about what stands in our way.

Our unhealthy attachment to money, our anxiety about not having enough. So that brings us to this morning's confrontation between Jesus and the religious authorities. They want to put Jesus in the trick bag as the old saying goes.

And so they ask him whether it's lawful to pay taxes to the emperor. The trick was that the emperor Augustus considered himself to be a god and his head was engraved on the coin used to pay the taxes. Jews consider this blasphemous.

So using the emperor's coin to pay taxes was blasphemy. On the other hand, refusing to pay taxes would be countenancing sedition. They present Jesus with a political dilemma and they expect a political response.

The trap is sprung. Except it's not. Caesar can have his head on all the coin in the world, Jesus says.

Caesar can be in the middle of the world's economy of scarcity. Caesar will be flattered by how well he looks when his head is stamped on the coin of that worldly realm. But the coin of the realm of human life, human life which is stamped in the image and likeness of God, that's the coin that must be offered to God.

Every human life is marked with that inscription. Every human life reflects the source from which it came and the destination for which it's bound. Every human life belongs to God and every human life will one day return to God.

You know we spend our days negotiating these two economies, Caesar's economy of scarcity and God's economy of abundance and grace. Let me ask you a question. When you look at your neighbor or a friend or when you look at someone you don't even particularly like, whose image do you see? Caesar's image or the divine image? Whose image do you see when you look in the mirror in the morning? When we see Caesar's image, we see the things that separate us and divide us.

We compare and contrast ourselves and too often we don't like what we see. We're either superior or inferior, you know we're either up or down. We mostly see what we think we lack.

In other words, we see scarcity. But when we look at our neighbor or when we look at our friend or when we even look at someone we don't particularly like or when

we look at ourselves and see the divine image, that's when we see abundance and compassion and grace. And you know all of those faces are a part of your face.

When you begin to see the image that God sees, you begin to see the face of Christ in your mirror and in other people, even in the ones you don't like. So what does this mean as a practical matter? Well, one thing it means is yes, we pay our taxes, dang it. Whether we like it or not, Caesar gets his cut.

No way around it. But what about God? Does God get God's share too? No. God doesn't get a share of our lives.

God gets it all. God should get the whole of our lives, all that we have and all that we are. You know there are lots of ways to live this out.

What are your commitments of your time? What are your commitments of your God-given gifts and talents? Are those gifts and talents and time being used in the service of building up the kingdom of heaven?

Well, one way to find that out is to participate in the various spiritual gifts workshops that are being offered by our Director of Engagement Michelle Cox and Ashley Bond, our Director of Formation. There's information on those in your bulletin or on the website. Take a look.

It's really fascinating. And what about your treasure? The coin of the realm, the coin with Caesar's image inscribed on it. Here's an interesting insight from our recent parish survey.

The respondents to the survey identified three top priorities for Trinity going forward as the parish searches for a new rector. These priorities were one, to reach new people. Two, to minister to children and youth.

And three, to develop spiritual generosity of the people to financially support ministry. I'm fascinated, fascinated to see that this last category was placed in the

highest priority of all. There's apparently a broad understanding that the people of Trinity must broaden and deepen the spiritual practice of financial generosity.

If Trinity aims to attract the best rector candidates and thrive into the future, I'm delighted to learn this is a priority. But I'm going to be honest with you, I was also surprised. As I've said over and over in the last 15 months that I've been privileged to serve as your interim rector, the data shows that Trinity's stewardship has been flat for the last seven years.

And what hadn't been flat is inflation, which during this period has increased about 35 percent. You don't believe me about this? Ask your ministry, ask your finance committee, they'll tell you. That means Trinity's been losing ground since 2017.

And that means there have been staff cuts and program cuts and muscle cuts. What are we going to do about that? It's up to you. I mean, you've already taken the first step.

You've identified the issue. The next step is to act on this awareness. You've received pledge packets, you've received a note from a fellow parishioner encouraging you to join them in participating in the work of supporting the kingdom of Trinity.

Yes, indeed, Trinity has needs. But you know what? You know what? I'm not suggesting you give to Trinity because Trinity has needs. I'm suggesting you give because you have needs.

You have the same need I do. You have the same need we all do. The need to be committed to something larger than yourself.

The need to belong to something larger than yourself. The need to live in hope and abundance instead of living in fear and scarcity. That's why I give to Trinity.

I give out of my own need. My need to be a committed follower of the Lord Jesus Christ. My need to belong to a loving, compassionate, spirit-filled community.

My need to live abundantly and faithfully. Those are powerful needs in my life and they outweigh the fear of scarcity. You and I both have a need to give back to God the coin of the realm of our whole lives.

I've told you that Zonnie and I have already committed to tithe 10 percent of our expected income next year to the work of building up the kingdom at Trinity. And I'm also going to tell you it feels sacrificial. But way more important than that, way more important, it feels joyful.

Will you join us? Will you move from dutiful giving to sacrificial giving to joy? At whatever level feels meet and right, I don't know and can't know what that level is for you, but you do. When you responded to that survey, you identified spiritual giving as the highest priority for this place. Now's the time to act on it.

Give back to God the coin of the realm of your whole life. You know there's a song that I really love that captures beautifully the push and pull of giving our whole lives to the abundance of the kingdom. To giving our whole lives to the abundance of the kingdom in a world that wants to convince us to live in scarcity.

You know it's a song many of you love too. Get your green books out. It's page 19 in your green books.

Let's sing this song together and think about as you sing the song, as you listen to the let the words flow into you and just feel what it's like to give abundantly. All that we have and all that we offer comes from a heart both frightened and free. Take what we bring now and give what we need, all done in his name.

Some would rely on their power, others put trust in their gold. Some have only their savior whose faithfulness never grows old. All that we have and all that we offer comes from a heart both frightened and free.

Take what we bring now and give what we need, all done in his name. Sometimes the road may be lonesome, often we may lose our way. We could remember love isn't just for a day.

All that we have and all that we offer comes from a heart both frightened and free. Take what we bring now and give what we need, all done in his name. Sometimes when troubles are many, life can seem empty, it's true.

Look at the life of the master who lived and suffered for you. All that we have and all that we offer comes from a heart both frightened and free. Take what we bring now and give what we need, all done in his name.

Amen.