

This was an actual letter addressed to the Internal Revenue Service: "Dear IRS: My conscience has been bothering me. Here is \$1000 which I owe in back taxes." A postscript at the bottom of the page read: "If my conscience continues to bother me, I'll send you the rest." (CELEBRATION, 16 October 2005, p 3)

In December 1985, US Congressman Delbert L. Latta summarized the progress being made on simplifying the tax code. "I hold in my hand," he declared, "1,379 pages of tax simplification." Mark Twain famously said "While figures don't lie; liars do figure."

Tax issues have been around for as long as there have been governments. So we jump in with Jesus and taxes. But some background is important to understand the non-answer Jesus makes to His questioners. When Jesus asked the Pharisees, "Whose image is this – and whose inscription?", the Greek word translated 'image' is *eikon*, from which we get the English word 'icon.' The word image takes us all the way back to Genesis – where we are told that we are "made in the IMAGE and likeness of God."

SO, if we give the coin to the emperor because it is his image on it, then it follows that we give to God ourselves – for we have HIS image stamped upon us. Jesus is refusing to play the win-lose games of the Pharisees, but He is backing it up with a more profound truth: We owe the ONE who made us our very lives – that means everything of who we are, including our money. (adapted from Paul J. Neuchterlein, HOMILETICS, Octo 05, p. 55-56)

Which brings me to the meat of the matter of my homily. Stewardship. Stewardship is about being listeners and lovers – becoming as fully human as we can – which means being as fully God-like as we can. We are icons, or images of Jesus as His disciples. Jesus was a listener to the pains and sorrows of humanity, and a lover of ALL in the midst of their sufferings. When we die, God will ask us 2 things: Were you a good listener? And were you a good lover? To live in the Spirit of God is to be a listener and a lover. To be a steward is to walk the road of JOY, which is not a much traveled road these days. Everywhere people are stressed out, overtired, grumpy, and angry. Even in the Church. Maybe we should call ourselves the 'grumpy children of God!'

And even in the midst of a pandemic, we have it better than anyone else in the whole world! Why are we NOT the most thankful and happy people in the world? What do we have to complain about?! We are not at war in our native land, despite the economic downturn most of us are still doing ok or even better than ok – and we sleep safely in our beds at night with heat or air conditioning as needed. Most of us have no issues about when our next meal is going to be – in fact, we are more likely to be pondering how we are going to lose a few pounds. If we are without a job, struggling with an addiction or diagnosis, THEN we have something to worry and complain about. But even then, we have the presence of our loving God at all times.

Really, what do we have to complain about? Too often we are like the guy who got all A's – but flunked life! Stewardship sets us out on the road to joy. It restores order and balance – and gratitude to our lives. It gets our priorities – and values – straight. The phrase of an old song came from a preacher that Nat King Cole heard as a child: "Straighten up – and fly right!"

Stewardship gives an answer to the 4 most fundamental questions in life:

Who am I?

Where am I going?

How do I get there?

Where are the cookies? (OK, I lied – there are only 3 fundamental questions – just checking to see if you were listening! BUT THE COOKIE QUESTION IS VERY IMPORTANT – ESPECIALLY IF THEY ARE CHOCOLATE CHIP!)

Stewardship says WHOSE we are, gives us a direction for our life, and helps us to get to heaven at the end of our days. We do that with our time, talent and treasure. The FOURTH ‘T’ of stewardship is actually TRANSCENDENCE, which is the grounding of our lives in the God-in-whose-image we are made. When we know WHOSE we are, and where we are going, we are not easily seduced by the detours of money, sex, stuff, power. We don’t lose our way when we know in whose image we are made. And most of all – we are grateful – because every breath is a gift.

Unfortunately many people in our culture have lost their way, and life is about the three A’s – Affluence, Appearance, and Achievement. These aren’t bad, but they are NOT LIFE! And who we are as stewards, influences who we are as a parish. If we want to be a good parish, we have to be good stewards. A live parish is made up of tithers, it reaches out to others, and it makes a lot of difference. A dead parish has tippers, not tithers, and it is about fossilization, taking care of itself, and is usually dead quiet. Some parishes should simply be given a decent funeral – and then move on!

American values are also about the Three C’s – Consumption, Confrontation, and Control. We live in an AFFLUENZA society that wants more and more, an ‘in your face culture that is worried about getting cheated out of my rights, my dues, my things. And we want control over how our life is going to unfold. For many people in our culture, they are what they have – which is the most pathetic type of person imaginable.

Other American values are the Three P’s – Power, Possessions, and Prestige. We are all deeply affected by this. We want to be on top, to have the power, we need to have the latest and most fashionable and stylish, and we want to be looked up to and admired – and often think that we will be if we live at the right address, drive the right car, and wear the right clothes. How in the world does wearing an alligator or a polo player on our clothes make us special?! Or better than anyone else? Can we get any more shallow than this?! These externals don’t mean anything at all to God. We had a crusty old Jesuit who gave the priest retreat a number of years ago. He chain-smoked the entire time he talked, his hair hadn’t seen a comb in days, and he looked like an unmade bed. He sat there and said to all of us priests: “When God sees you, He sees you bare naked!” Egad! Poor God!

While the gospel calls us to a life of simplicity, we are a nation of HAVERS. And millions of our brothers and sisters are HAVE NOTS. And I still sleep pretty well at night.

When I moved here 2 and a half years ago, I gave half of my clothes away. And I felt pretty good about it. But I still haven’t worn some things in my closet more than once in the past year. I need to clean it out again. Sometimes I think stuff just multiplies in there under the cover of darkness!

This image issue is a significant reality. We live on images. Tell me who God is for you. Then tell me your image of yourself. Because whatever our image of God and ourselves is – will determine who we are. Whatever controls our imagination, controls our actions – and therefore, our culture. If we think we don’t have enough, then we will constantly pursue more. If we recognize that we are the beloved ones of God, created and sustained by God, and have everything because of God, then we know who we are, whose we are,

and then we are content and happy in life, regardless of our external circumstances at any given moment. Sure this pandemic is not the most fun time of our lives – but why should it rob us of our happiness? Yes, if we have lost someone we love, we mourn and we have a right to grieve. But what we call ‘untimely’ deaths happen all the time, and we have to move on with life. If we believe that those who die go home to God – which we say that we do -- then even death is not a bad thing.

The problem goes back to images. What shapes our images? TV! The media! I saw this in the paper – twice – so it must be true! -- by age 50, the average American has watched 9-11 YEARS of TV! And what did a person see in those 9-11 years? IMAGES! Which shape our attitudes! Which leads to our behaviors! Which exists to shape and mold us into consumers who buy buy buy!

What we need – and what stewardship provides – is a radical change of images. It is a conversion, a change of heart and mind. I had a conversation a couple years ago with a guy who was 49 years old. He was making over \$250,000 a year. And he said to me “Something happened to me a couple months back. I suddenly realized that it is not MY wife, MY 4 kids, not MY anything. If one of our kids died, my wife and I would weep – but the child was given to us in trust. The child belongs to God! And goes back to God. And,” he said, “for the first time in my life – I feel free, and grateful for everything I have.” He had changed his images, which he said then had demanded a change in his behavior. He said that he had finally begun to tithe.

I think this is a great part of the difficulty in preaching about stewardship. We have to change our images, so that we change our behaviors.

Right now, we are running about 11% behind last year in giving. We are also almost 25 thousand dollars behind budget. We have to decide whether God is important – or money. But stewardship is not a money problem. It is a faith problem. If we believe God is the source of all that we have and own – then we want to share it. We are grateful and eager to share what we have. But if we believe that we got what we got because we are smarter and more talented than the rest – then we don’t believe at all what our church teaches. And we are clueless about the gospel of Jesus Christ.

I give you four final notes about stewardship, rendering to God what belongs to God.

First, Stewardship is to receive God’s gifts gratefully. We WALKED in here – millions can’t. We can vote. We have education, books, the freedom to worship. Millions don’t have any of this. Are we grateful for all that we have been given? The sense of gratitude is the only real source for joyful generosity. If we recognize everything as gift, then there is joy. And where there are stewards, there is joy. We can never catch up to God in giving.

Second, a steward cherishes God’s gifts responsibly. Do we cherish, nurture and develop our gifts? If not, then we are wasting them. With TV – 9-11 YEARS of life – we WASTE a lot of time. Facebook, Twitter, and everything else suck time right out of our lives. If we just dropped ONE of those we would have plenty of time for prayer. It requires discipline. Everything in life requires discipline. It takes discipline to take the top 10% off before we get the urge to spend it.

Third, a steward shares what God has given generously and justly. We realize that the extra wealth we have is FOR the service of others, NOT for more and more goodies! When some eat nothing and we are perpetually too fat, there is something wrong with this picture. And we should take a look at our fun spending -- and our tithing -- and see where we need to make some adjustments.

Fourth, a steward returns to the Lord with abundance. We live life and live it to the full. That is stewardship! We enjoy the gifts of God – the sun and moon and stars, the rain and grass and trees and birds and friends and food and wine and good coffee and fall days and homilies that end (WAIT! – WHO PUT THAT IN THERE!?)

AND IN CONCLUSION (See – I took the hint!)

A wonderful little poem by Antonio Macciardo on a dialogue between the wind and a garden. The wind is the Holy Spirit and the garden is us – and it ends with a wonderful stewardship question.

The wind, one brilliant day,

Called to my soul with an aroma of jasmine.

In return for this jasmine odor, I'd like the odor of your roses.

I have no roses. I have no flowers left in my garden.

All are dead.

Then I'll take the waters of the fountains and the yellow leaves and the dried up petals.

The wind left.

I wept. I said to my soul:

What have you done with the garden entrusted to you?

--adapted from my notes on a talk I heard at a conference – and I believe the speaker was Bishop Robert Morneau from Green Bay, Wisconsin.