

Matthew 22: 15 – 22 “Encountering the “M” word”

Newtonbrook United Church, October 19, 2008



As I begin this morning, I want to ask two questions;

- 1) how many here today consider that the Bible is “authoritative” in your life – or ought to be an authority in how you make decisions?
- 2) how many people here today would consider that you fit in sociologically and economically in you neighbourhood?

Jesus said; “Give to God the things that are God’s” (Mt.22:21)

How can that apply to our lives today? What do we give to God? Yes, this morning we’re about to have an encounter with the “M” word. Money was a topic that Jesus frequently spoke about, such as in the story in the Gospel According to Matthew that Eldon read.

This story is relevant because this congregation has just been asked to begin thinking about your financial stewardship for the next calendar year. I am going to ask that everyone here consider giving a proportion of your income for God’s mission here at Newtonbrook.

IMAGINE what the ministry of NUC might be if we were to follow the instruction of Jesus to, “Give to God the things that are God’s” (Mt.22:21) How much are we to give to God?

The Rev. Dr. Tony Campolo is a very well known speaker in the U.S.A. He tells a story about what happened one morning after he had arrived home in Philadelphia after a “red-eye” flight from the West Coast. That’s one of those flights where you take off from a place like Vancouver late in the evening, and arrive here in Toronto early in the morning.

Campolo says that when he got off the plane at 8:30 am he was met by his secretary, who then broke the news to him that he had a 10:00 am speaking engagement. There had been a terrible mistake made in his schedule. She was meeting him to take him

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directly to the church for a World Day of Prayer service. Dr. Campolo was to deliver a “missionary message.”

They drove to the church and when Tony Campolo took his place behind the pulpit he says he, “wasn’t thinking clearly.” This was the last place he wanted to be. He’d rather be at home in bed. Consequently Campolo didn’t react in the expected manner when the woman leading the group announced to the several hundred women, and a few men, that she had a prayer request from a missionary in Venezuela.

She described a wonderful doctor who had given her life to serving the poor in the barrios of Caracas. The missionary was pleading for \$5,000 to put an addition on her medical dispensary. It was desperately needed because the facilities could not handle all the sick and infirm who came her way.

The leader of the group then asked, “Dr. Campolo, would you please lead us in prayer that The Lord might provide the \$5,000 that is needed by our sister in Venezuela?”

Campolo says that before he could catch his himself he stood up and said; “No, but what I will do is take all the money I am carrying on me and put it on the altar. Then I’m going to ask everyone else here to do the same. No need to write our cheques! We’ll only accept cash! After we’ve all put the cash we’re carrying on the altar, we’ll count it. If we don’t have \$5,000, I’ll ask God to write out a cheque for the difference.”

Campolo also said; “It was a good day to pull this off, because I was only carrying \$2.25.”

The leader smiled benevolently and said, “We’ve all gotten the point, haven’t we?”

Campolo responded, “No, I don’t think we have. My \$2.25 is on the table. Now its your turn.”

She opened her wallet and slapped \$110 down on the table.

Campolo said, “We’re on our way! We have \$112.25. Now it’s your turn.

He pointed to a woman in the front pew, who got up and put some money on the table. He went from row to row in the church. Some people gave Campolo what he calls,

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“dirty looks.” When everyone had finished they counted it – remember Campolo was going to ask God to write a cheque if they were short of \$5,000.

How much money do you think was on the communion table? Remember, they wanted \$5,000.

When they counted the money, the donations amounted to \$8,000.

Campolo says, “There wasn’t any time left for me to preach. I don’t think that they wanted to hear from me anyway. So I simply said to the congregation, “Imagine the audacity of asking God for \$5,000 when He has already provided us with more than \$8,000. We should not be asking God to supply our needs, He (sic) already has.”¹

Jesus said; “Give to God the things that are God’s” (Mt.22:21)

I want to go back to the first question that I asked:

how many here today consider that the Bible is “authoritative” in your life – or ought to be an authority in how you make decisions?

How much to give to the church was an issue with me when I returned to church. Shari & I wrestled with the question and decided on proportional giving – giving a percentage of our incomes. We knew that the Bible indicated that tithing – 10 per cent – was the standard, but we were, and are, United Church people. We decided that 10 per cent was too much. AND we also decided that the Bible was right in that we ought to give in relation to the wealth that we have received.

Later, when I began attending Emmanuel College I became convinced of the Biblical wisdom of tithing – giving the first ten per cent of one’s earnings to church and charity. That’s a long story (for another sermon) and I’ll just simply say that, for me, there has been peace in my soul ever since I took up the practice of tithing. To me, it feels right. Tithing, to me, is giving back to God a bit of what God has already given to me. Jesus said; “Give to God the things that are God’s” (Mt.22:21)

JUST IMAGINE the ministry possibilities here at Newtonbrook – possibilities that are emerging through the Surfing With The Spirit process. There are so many opportunities for ministry in this community that the mind boggles – and the financial resources are available to provide for these ministries.

¹ (from Preface to “The Faithful Steward”, by Michael O’Hurley-Pitts)

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How do I know? I've done the math. I'll share it with you in a Tony Campolo manner.

RELAX! I'm not brave enough to ask for a parade to the communion table. You may want to, but I'm requesting that you stay seated.

Campolo said that there were several hundred in the church that day. Here at Newtonbrook you've reported to the United Church of Canada that there were 202 “Financially Supporting Households” in 2006.

The Stewardship Committee has put together 230 “packages” to go to people who are a part of this congregation.

So, let's say that there are 200 households (slide #1).

How much might be in these wallets on an annual basis? That's a question about Annual Incomes.

The website for the riding of Willowdale in last week's federal election reported that the AVERAGE annual income for Willowdale households is \$94,000²(slide #2).

In all of my experience in the United Church, I've never been in a congregation where the people are as affluent as their neighbours. When it comes to money, as much as you may have indicated that you fit in economically, my experience would indicate that the average household income of this congregation is less than \$94,000.

Let's use \$50,000 (slide #3) That's approximately 50 per cent of the average for your neighbourhood here at Newtonbrook.

So, to find out how much is in our wallets – Campolo style – on an annual basis we multiply 200 x \$50,000 = \$10,000,000. (slide #4) 10 million dollars is one possible calculation of the annual income of the people who donate to Newtonbrook United Church. (slide #5)

If those 200 households were to donate 10% of their incomes, Newtonbrook would have an income of \$1 million annually (slide #6) IMAGINE the ministry possible here at Newtonbrook with resources of \$1 million per year!

² www.cbc.ca/news/canadavotes/riding/207/

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(slide #7)

So how are we doing? I suspect that not everyone here has a copy of last year's Annual Report³ with them this morning. In short, in 2007 Newtonbrook donated \$34,000 to the M&S Fund of the United Church of Canada. (slide #8)

The donations to the local account amounted to \$185,000. That's a total of \$219,000 out of a possible, and I underline the word POSSIBLE - income pool of \$10,000,000.

Of course we have made some assumptions in these calculations. I know that not everyone in Willowdale has an annual income of \$50,000. I know of people who I have met in this congregation who are struggling to make ends meet. I know people here who are unemployed, or in transition in their careers. I know people who are on fixed incomes, and I also know people who are very concerned about the current economic situation and its implications for their lives.

Jesus said; “Give to God the things that are God's” (Mt.22:21)

Maybe we have something to learn from those who have travelled further in the journey of life. (slide #9) The research in the Surfing With The Spirit project showed that nearly 50 % of local church givings here at Newtonbrook are from those who are 70 years of age, or older.

JUST IMAGINE the ministry possibilities here at Newtonbrook – possibilities that we identified through the Surfing With The Spirit project. There are so many opportunities for ministry in this community that the mind boggles – and God has provided the financial resources for these ministries.

(Slide # 10)

Tony Compolo says that the Christians in the early church did not have to be manipulated into giving in the way that he did with that group of women. We read about the apostle Paul's description of giving in 2 Corinthians 8: 1 – 4:

Now, friends, I want to report on the surprising and generous ways in which God is working in the churches in Macedonia province. Fierce troubles came down on the people of those churches, pushing them to the very limit. The trial exposed their true colors: They were incredibly happy, though desperately

³ All figures are from the 2007 Annual Report to the congregation

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poor. The pressure triggered something totally unexpected: an outpouring of pure and generous gifts. I was there and saw it for myself. They gave offerings of whatever they could—far more than they could afford!—pleading for the privilege of helping out in the relief of poor Christians.⁴

All of this I am saying is within the context of a society where fear of financial collapse and ruin is a worry for many. A culture that has fixated itself on money has begun to realize the logical consequences of placing its faith in material goods. As Jesus said: “No one can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money.”⁵

This congregation has been asked to begin thinking about financial stewardship for the next calendar year. I am asking that everyone here consider giving a proportion of your income for God’s mission here at Newtonbrook, because Jesus said;

“Give to God the things that are God’s” (Mt.22:21)

JUST IMAGINE what is possible!

Hymn #539—God of All Good



⁴ from “The Message”, 2 Cor. 8: 1 - 4

⁵ Matthew 6:24

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Prayers for God's Family & Creation*

Holy Mystery, ever-loving God,
our Creator and Redeemer,
you have given us life within your total community of life.
It is in you, and in relationship and in respect for creation
that we live our lives.
We are not alone.

In the beauty of autumn,
when all along the line of smoky hills,
we hear the blue jay call.
We thank you God for the beauty of the earth.

Eternal God, we live in disturbing days;
across your world prices rise; debts increase; banks collapse;
jobs are taken away, and fragile security is under threat.

Loving God, meet us in our fears and hear our prayer,
be our rock amidst the shifting sands,
may we see that you are a light in our darkest times,
help us receive your gift of peace,
and focus our hearts where true joy is to be found,
following the way of Jesus.

Strengthen us with your Spirit,
that we may share our gifts of
caring, sharing and healing,
within the whole world-wide human family,
and with all of life here on your planet earth.
In particular, this morning, we open our hearts
and pray for those who we know

Open our hearts and minds to your guiding Spirit,
we pray,
as followers of Jesus who taught us the way
to live in peace, with justice. Amen.

* Thanks to the Church of England for many of the words in this prayer.