

“The story a wallet tells”

A sermon shared with the congregation of St. Andrew's United Church on
Sunday October 22, 2017 by Catherine Somerville
Scripture: Matthew 22: 15-22

I am going to invite you to try an experiment this morning. I ask you to take out your wallet and open it up. Don't take anything out. Just open your wallet so you can take a good look inside.

I imagine that your wallet looks just like mine.

There is some money in there.

There is a credit card.

There is a bank card.

There are rewards cards — gas cards, my Kuppajo card.

There is some identification — a driver's licence, a health card.

There is a receipt from something I purchased.

Those pieces tell a certain story about my life, but there are other things in there that reveal other clues about me.

There is a picture of someone I love. How many people carry pictures in their wallets?

There is an angel someone gave me once; she called it a traveling angel to keep me safe. Do you have something like a token that reminds you of faith?

Some people carry a poem or a fortune cookie saying. Do you?

I have a list of books that sound interesting, titles I need to look for in the library. Does your wallet contain reminders like that?

I have my offering envelope, ready with a donation to the church.

There are cards for a couple of volunteer groups I am associated with, places I where give a bit of my time.

What other pieces do you have in your wallet?

Those pieces tell more about us, about our priorities. A wallet can tell an awful lot about a person.

One day, Jesus had a conversation about money. It was a dialogue between the Pharisees and the Herodians. Those two groups did not like each other, but they did have one thing in common. They did not like Jesus. So they hold up their noses, put aside their many differences for a moment, and come together to pose to Jesus a question that they hope will put him between a rock and a hard place. It was a question about paying taxes.

If he answers that taxes are lawful, Jesus will give offense to the Pharisees who hate the emperor's constant meddling in their daily lives, not to mention the poor, who are especially burdened by this tax on every citizen in the Roman Empire. On the other hand, if he speaks out against the tax, it won't take long for the Herodians who are loyalists to Rome and to the Emperor, to take news of seditious talk back to the powers that be. It is a

well-laid trap, and all the more so because it is prefaced by a flattering reminder that Jesus has a reputation for fearless truth-telling.

Jesus is not to be fooled. He reframes the challenge by asking for a coin. Notice that his pockets are empty, but his opponents have no trouble supplying a denarius on demand.

Jesus asks them whose image they see. And he responds: "Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor's. Give to God the things that are God's."

There are many interpretations of this story. Some people see this as an example of Jesus wiggling out of a trap. Some see it as justification for keeping God and politics separate. Others say that this story proves that religion is a matter of the heart, and that Jesus doesn't really care about mundane things, like what you do with your money. And some people say this is the proof that Jesus taught that the law is the law, and our duty as Christians is to support the government no matter what. All of these interpretations are quite questionable.

I picture him flipping the coin in his hand a few times, and then tossing it casually aside. In my imagination, I see his eyes rising to meet those of his opponents, confronting each of them with an unspoken question hanging in the air, "And you, my friend: Whose image do you bear?"

For us who still bother to read and ponder ancient stories, the truth he is trying to get across, is that we belong entirely to God.

And things like wallets help to tell the story of your life, about who you are, the people you belong to, and what you value most in your life. My wallet is a reminder to me about how I am called to live my life in balance.

When I was a teenager, I attended youth events in Hamilton Presbytery. Just as an aside, since it is Stewardship month and we are inviting you to think of ways you might consider supporting the work of the church, did you know that we have a fund that is dedicated specifically to finding ways to grow the faith of the youth of our church? Because of this fund, at least six of our youth have attended events with other Christian youth, events like Rendez-vous, Youth Forum and Worshiplude.

The money for that fund came originally from a family who wanted to honour the legacy of their mother and grandmother. That woman was Eleanor Brault. Eleanor lived a life of vision, encouraging her children to learn how they might offer their gifts of leadership in the world. She was a strong advocate for her own sons and her own daughter. Because they were grateful for their mother's love, her family wanted other youth to know of, and be able to try out, the opportunities that they themselves had been given. Following her death, Eleanor's family established an endowment fund, and because of Eleanor's example and vision, we continue to send the youth of this church to events where they meet other youth across the Presbytery and the Conference. At these events, the youth do a lot of laughing and learning and growing in their faith. They find like-minded friends who share their values. They are growing to take on leadership in our church.

St. Andrew's is doing for our youth what others did for me, and because of those youth events I attended back in Hamilton 40 years ago, and through the care offered by my home

congregation and the vision of a minister who became a role model, I experienced my own call to ministry.

Back to the story of balance though... I remember one weekend held at Livingstone United Church, in the North End of Hamilton, right near the steel mills. The theme was "Living a God-centered Life." We were given the example of a quadrant: a picture a four leaf clover. In one section is the physical aspects of life — exercising, eating well, getting enough sleep. There is the intellectual aspect of living — going to school, reading things that challenge you mind and your perceptions, being curious about the world. There is the relationship piece — learning from your parents, your teachers, from the people at church, cultivating friends who help you walk in good paths. And there is the spiritual aspect of living — making room for godly things, like prayer and community, worship and service, showing devotion to God in Jesus Christ.

That weekend, we heard speaker after speaker tell us about what it means to live an integrated life. If, for example, a body builder, who spends all his time in the gym, may develop muscles so big that he can't put your arms by his sides, then all that time in the gym means that he may be missing out on developing good relationships or spending enough time doing homework that feeds his brain. That weekend, we were challenged to consider how we live in balance, what we might do to build all four aspects of our living, in order that we would grow in our faith, care for our bodies in good ways, cultivate loving relationships, and think about things that matter.

I have always remembered that wisdom. I have tried to live it in my being. I hope you might see it in my priorities. I want to be reminded every time I open my wallet.

Today, we hear Jesus saying to us, "And you, my friend, whose image do you bear?" If someone were to open your wallet, what would they learn about your priorities? What would they learn about your commitment and giving to God the things that belong to God, like your time, your prayer, your love and your bounty?

Whose image do you bear? Truth told, the image can sometimes be difficult to recognize.

When we look at each other, or in the mirror, we tend to see the inscriptions the world places on us, all the business pieces of living. But underneath those inscriptions are much deeper marks. Like the kiss of light in your eyes, the watery sign of a cross made once upon a time on your forehead, the image of you being held in the love of someone's arms, along with all the faces of people who have left their mark on you and changed how you live your life now. It might be seen in a reminder you carry with you every single day — like a prayer card or a traveling angel.

When we look beyond the obvious worldly pieces, we see the image God sees, the image engraved in the palm of the hand of God, and we understand a bit more, the love of the One who loves us beyond imaging.

Sources Used:

Matthew 22:15-22 commentary by Lance Pape, found on workingpreacher.org
Feasting on the Word, Year A, Volume 4, pages 182-187
A conversation with Donna Mese, about her mother, Eleanor Brault.