

Deal, or No Deal
July 6, 2008
Geneseo United Methodist Church
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Matthew 23:23-24

²³ "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint, dill, and cummin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith. It is these you ought to have practiced without neglecting the others. ²⁴ You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel!

My guess is that most of you have seen the new T.V. game show, *Deal, or No Deal*. And I must confess, I have never seen a full show. (Sorry, I just can't force myself to sit through it) While I must agree that there is some element of entertainment, I struggle to know why it can hold a nation captive for a whole hour. I mean, someone picks out a suitcase then through a process of elimination ends up with some amount of money between \$1 and \$1,000,000. We know how it starts, we know how it ends, we even know that the middle is filled with the ups and downs of trying to guess what dollar figures are in each case. But why in the world does that intrigue a nation so much that it holds an hour of prime air time?

To be honest it leaves me befuddled. However, as I thought about it, I realize there are two elements about this show that capture the American people. First of all is the \$1,000,000 cash prize. That seems to be a fantasy for most people today. Secondly is the emotions of risking it all to get more. Now Howie, the host of the show helps out here a lot. He is good at enticing the contestant, and even the home audience.

The role of the banker in the show is played as an aggravator, someone who annoys and intensifies the emotions of the contestant. But in reality, the banker is simply trying to manage the game for the least amount of loss. They run the numbers, they play the audience and confound the contestant, but all they are really worried about, is how to give away the least amount of money, and still look good to everyone involved.

Basically the show is glorified gambling morphed into entertainment.

Now you may be saying to yourself, what does that have to do with the scripture? How does that relate in the slightest to church?

Well, in this passage of Matthew 23, we are still in the middle of Jesus rant against the behavior of the Pharisees. You see, they were behaving like they could make a deal with God, choose the case of their liking, and get rid of the rest.

The case they chose was the law. They knew the right offerings and they followed everything to the letter. But by doing so, they missed something even greater.

Bear with me, we will get to what they were missing. But for now, let's talk about what they placed so much value upon, the tithe.

Now today when we think about a tithe, we generally consider only money, it was not all that long ago that it was viewed as much more. I have heard tale in this church, and even read in the history book about offerings given that might include garden produce, livestock, or other items. That is even the foundation behind the Lord's Portion sale that we hold every November. It represents the giving of the first 10% of the harvest to God. Similarly in the days of Jesus and according to scripture, the tithe was to be the first 10% of everything; the fruit, grain, herbs of the field, the animals, and the household goods. The Israelite people understood that 10% of everything belonged to God. And I am quite sure that the Pharisees not only knew this, but that they practiced this with great diligence.

However, even though they were the spiritual leaders of the day, Jesus was not afraid to call a spade a spade. He compared their tithe to mint, dill, and cumin.

Now if you look at how big those are in your cooking cupboards, how much room do they take up? Ouch, Jesus is comparing their gifts on the altar to three of the smallest herbs available, almost as if they have no value at all. This is what the Pharisees placed such great value upon.

It would be like getting down to the final case in *Deal, or No Deal*, and finding that there is only \$1 in the case; the case that the contestant had protected, and fought to keep during the whole game was worthless. Just like the video I showed for the Children's time, the squirrel that was so focused on that nut that he caused the next ice age, sometimes we allow things in our lives to become so all consuming that we miss what is really important around us.

That sounds like we are making a deal with God. God, I can afford to give 1.8% of my income to you. (That is what the average Christian puts into the offering plate even though we know it is supposed to be 10%) Or, God I can make time to be in church 1.5 Sunday's per month. (Again the average attendance for those who say they are regular attendees, even though we know it is supposed to be every Sabbath) Or, I will invite someone to church once every 30 years (the average for United Methodists, even though we know Jesus tells us to go and make disciples every day) Or, God give justice, freedom, liberty, and prosperity to Americans, (especially on our fourth of July weekend) but don't worry about the other 95.4% of the world population. (that sounds like the same selfishness that caused the Pharisees to neglect justice, mercy, and faith)

We tithe the mint, the dill, and the cumin, but neglect the weightier matters, because they cost us so much more.

Can you imagine the discomfort of the crowd, or the Pharisees themselves as Jesus is accosting them for their negligence to the law of God, the very thing that they are supposed to be experts on? It was no wonder they didn't like Jesus. Over and over in this passage Jesus called them hypocrites, blind guides, and fools. They had never heard someone speak to them in such a terrible and offensive way.

It would be like someone standing in the pulpit on the 4th of July weekend and telling us that while we have secured freedom, justice, and prosperity for 4.6% of the world, but we have neglected those who are on the other side of the border, or those who are half way across the world. It would be like someone accusing our government of fattening the golden calf, and leaving everyone else to subsist on manna.

Boy, if you heard something like that, it would make it easy to dislike that person, Jesus, or whoever who was bold enough to call a spade a spade.

These things are not the things we like to hear. They are not what make us feel good and convince us that we are doing what is expected of us. But the truth is, Jesus never affirmed someone in their faults. He always pushed them to a higher standard, even above the standard of the law. He pushed people to open their eyes to the needs of others.

In reality, the Pharisees (just like us) had probably become so comfortable with the way things were, tithing 1.8%, worshipping 33%, evangelizing 0%, and seeking justice for themselves, that they didn't even understand what Jesus was telling them.

That is the situation in our church and society. But in our personal lives, today, we have become so focused on the briefcase called grace, that we have neglected many other areas of our Christian responsibilities.

Grace is God's gift to us. Because of that, becoming a Christian is easy, almost too easy. Believe in Jesus Christ as your lord and savior and you win eternal life, the million dollar brief case. But it doesn't end there. The Pharisees did what was required of them, but Jesus said that was not enough, it was short sighted. Jesus said, their actions had to reflect God's love, justice, mercy, and faith into the world, and that is what we must do too. But what does that look like?

I think our United Methodist membership vows are a good place to start. I hope most of you are familiar with the traditional four expectations of membership. When we become members of a congregation, we vow to be involved through our prayers, our presence, our gifts, and our service. Traditionally we have viewed those as a part of our expectations as Christians, and our tithe to God; our prayers, presence, gifts, and our service. But again, those can be like the mint, dill, and cumin, not enough.

In the recent General Conference, one element was added to those four membership vows; that item is "witness." Personally I believe it was not in there before because 100 years ago it was something that we just did, it was an assumed part of being a Christian. However, in the Cultural American Church, it has become an element of faith that is all but extinct.

Let's say those five responsibilities together as a way of confirming our Christian commitment to God and to each other. (I will say a word, and give you time to respond) We promise to be faithful Christians through our "Prayers, Presence, Gifts, Service, and Witness."

For the Pharisees, the final question Jesus was posing to them in this passage was, can you keep the law, and still offer justice, mercy, and faith to the world?

For us today, the question we must ask ourselves is, can we accept God's grace and salvation, and still fulfill our Christian responsibilities to give our prayers, presence, gifts, service, and witness to God, and the world around us? After all, that is the vow each one of us take when we enter the United Methodist Church.

Let's stop trying to make a deal with God. Amen.