

The Value of a Penny

Luke 15: 11-24

Then Jesus said, “There was a man who had two sons. The younger of them said to his father, ‘Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.’ So he divided his property between them. A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living. When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. But when he came to himself he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.”’ So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. Then the son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’ But the father said to his slaves, ‘Quickly, bring out a robe—the best one—and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!’ And they began to celebrate.

Our story this morning is a familiar one to many of us. And when you ask a group of people about their favorite Bible stories, this one almost always comes up. We love this story because we can identify with all the characters.

But this morning, I want us to focus on the younger son. He makes an absurd request to receive his inheritance before his father dies, but he doesn’t ask for any more or less than his fair share. He only wants what’s coming to him. The son takes the money and runs, and he mismanages almost every penny. Gambling, women, fast cars, alcohol... and before he knows it, the money is gone. The son finds a job, but it’s a down economy, and he isn’t paid enough to live on. His job is to feed the pigs, and he looks longingly at the pig slop, wishing he had something that good to eat. Gross, right?

Taking his fair share has not worked out so well for this son. His life becomes a miserable failure. He’s only interested in taking, not in contributing. It’s only after he loses all his money that he considers the concept of giving his time and effort in exchange for a paycheck. Even then, his life continues to be a disaster until he returns to his family.

The son thought he was just being fair, taking what was owed to him. But it can be a dangerous thing, demanding what you think is rightfully yours. Consider the rules of the road. Think way back to when you were first learning to drive. Remember learning that technically, the law doesn't give the right of way to anyone? There are circumstances when you are required to yield the right of way to someone else, but legally, no one has the right of way.

Consider a four-way stop. You approach the intersection and stop. You are the only vehicle stopped, but to your left you see a truck barreling down the road. It's clear that the driver doesn't see the stop sign and couldn't possibly stop in time anyway. The driver of the truck should yield the right of way to you. But if you try to take what's fair, and rightfully yours, you are going to crash. And anyone witnessing the event will admit that the truck ran the stop sign, but you appeared to ignore the truck and drive right into it.

Taking something, even when it seems right or fair, isn't always our best option. But when we flip that around, and talk about giving what is fair, good things happen. John Wesley incorporated this idea into the earliest formations of the Methodist movement.

So let's take a moment to explore what Methodism looked like in England in the 18th century. John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist movement, was a priest in the Church of England until the day he died. He never meant for Methodism to be a new church. He was just trying to start a renewal movement inside the established Anglican Church. He found out quickly, however, that the church had really become a social club, and members were not interested in growing in faith. They were also not particularly interested in welcoming in the lower and working classes. So John found himself reaching out to those people in particular.

Laborers worked on Sundays, so they couldn't attend church. John was hesitant to call his new movement a church, so when he gathered with people for weekly worship, they called their

group a 'Society.' Eventually, there were a number of Societies around England, each functioning just like a church. But that wasn't enough to bring about the renewal John wanted to see. John wanted to see people actually living according to the Book of Prayer. He wanted to see people who were serious about deepening their faith and living like Jesus.

So John divided each Society into smaller groups called Classes. Each class met once a week for two purposes. Primarily, the group met to uphold and encourage one another in faith. They checked in on each other's spiritual growth and faithfulness in behavior. The second purpose of the Class was to take up a weekly collection. Each person was required to contribute one penny. This was a nice, neat way to divide up the needs of the movement among all the members. This was meant to be fair – everyone pays the same amount. But the early Methodists were largely people who lived from paycheck to paycheck. Many couldn't afford even one penny a week. It was the Class Leader's responsibility, then, to contribute for them. In this manner, there was a regular source of income for the growing Methodist movement. This money was used for a wide variety of missions. Not only did they do evangelism and build new societies, they also built orphanages, schools and clinics.

We've lost the tradition of Class meetings, but more and more congregations are looking to our heritage and reclaiming this idea. But one thing that has remained through our history is the idea of giving a penny. Or more accurately, the idea of each person giving a fair share in order for the church at large to continue in ministry.

We call this practice connectional giving, or apportionments. What are our apportionments today? They are our source of budget and mission for the greater denomination. Each church pays a portion to the conference, and each conference pays a portion to the global

church. The formula for calculating what is a 'fair share' has gotten more complicated since the days of John Wesley.

The conference doesn't simply divide the annual budget by the number of United Methodists in the conference. In an effort to be fair, there's a complicated formula that takes into account a congregation's membership, attendance, budget size, or other relevant issues. Each conference can come up with their own particular formula. As you might guess, this is usually a work in process. From time to time, the conference applies a new formula as they seek to be fair to everyone. Regardless of the specifics, apportionments are a way to divide up our financial obligations among all of us.

Apportionments may be a responsibility, but they come with great reward. Because for the most part, apportionments allow us to reach out to the world in mission and ministry. Sure, some of the budget covers administrative costs of running the conference. Someone has to pay our employees a fair wage, and they do like to have electricity and running water in the conference office. But our apportionments also support a wide variety of ministries.

Around the country, we have 330 retirement homes and long-term care facilities. We have 69 hospitals and clinics, 59 childcare facilities, and 130 community service centers. We have 114 colleges, universities and seminaries. In just one year, over \$2.8 million was awarded as scholarship money to students at our schools. Over \$3 million was awarded in low-interest loans. Here in Wisconsin, we support retirement homes, community centers and clinics. We have campus ministries at 10 colleges and universities. And we support excellence in programming at our summer camp and retreat facilities. We have many more missions around the globe, but I don't have all that information at my fingertips.

We here at Crossroads couldn't possibly do all of this on our own. In fact, by ourselves, we'd have a hard time supporting even one of these ministries. But because we proudly pay 100% of our apportionments, we help support every one of these ministries. Not every congregation pays 100% of their apportionments. Some because of financial hardship, some because they don't really understand what their apportionments support.

In John Wesley's day, when someone couldn't pay their penny, someone else picked up the slack. What happens today when a church doesn't pay their share? It doesn't get assigned to someone else. Instead, the budget has to be reworked. Good, effective ministries have to cut back – sometimes to the point that they can't really continue their mission. Unfortunately, this doesn't just happen in a down economy. This happens year after year. So again let me say how proud I am of this congregation that you have paid your apportionments in full every single year.

If we took our congregation's apportionment amount and divided it equally among all our members, each member would be responsible for \$105. And that comes out to \$2 a week. That's a little bit more than a penny, but after 250 years of inflation, that sounds about right. Where else can you build and operate retirement homes, colleges and universities, medical facilities and new churches all for just \$2 a week? We fully intend to pay our apportionments in full this year, and you can help make that a reality.

I invite you to consider giving your fair share. Those of you who are members will receive a letter this week with instructions on how to contribute your share of our apportionment as a special gift in gratitude to God this Easter. Won't you consider joining me and millions of United Methodists around the world as we combine our resources? Because we can do more together than we can do alone. Amen and amen.