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“Call it in the air” **Sermon on Matthew 22:15-22**

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Matthew 22:15-22

Then the Pharisees went and plotted to entrap him in what he said. So they sent their disciples to him, along with the Herodians, saying, ‘Teacher, we know that you are sincere, and teach the way of God in accordance with truth, and show deference to no one; for you do not regard people with partiality. Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?’ But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, ‘Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites? Show me the coin used for the tax.’ And they brought him a denarius. Then he said to them, ‘Whose head is this, and whose title?’ They answered, ‘The emperor’s.’ Then he said to them, ‘Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s.’ When they heard this, they were amazed; and they left him and went away.

If you found yourself before God's throne and were allowed to ask one question, what would it be? “Why is there suffering?”

Maybe you would want to know, “What’s the world going to be like for my grandchildren?” Maybe you’d ask, “On average, how am I doing as a human being?” One question.

Surely, you wouldn’t blow the opportunity on something like, “What was the score of the Alabama game yesterday? I know what it was - I just wanted to hear you say it, God.” I mean, come on.

Surely, it wouldn’t be blown on a question about taxes. That’s a question for your CPA or for your tax attorney.

If you could stand before the throne of God and ask a question, wouldn't the occasion demand a God-sized question? Because life is filled with what feels like God-sized problems, I've fielded a lot of God-sized questions. Many times, those questions were launched during the children's sermons that I used to do in a prior lifetime.

I remember an Easter Sunday when the children brought up their fish banks. There was a time during Lent when families put cardboard banks shaped like fish - the fish an early church symbol for Christianity - on their dining room tables, and the children put their pennies, nickels, and quarters in them to help hungry people around the world. Then on Easter, the kids would haul their bulging banks up to the chancel and there would come the children's sermon.

I know saving pennies, nickels and quarters seems so antiquated. Today, we just simply ask the children to Venmo from the pews.

Back then, however, a pile of fish banks and a children's sermon on "Once upon a time Jesus took just a few fish and fed 5,000 people, and today we're going to use the coins you saved to feed hungry people all over the world. Yes, Paul, you have a question?"

And Paul said, "How come we don't just write a check?" The congregation laughed.

"Well, we are going to write a check. Our bookkeeper is going to count up all the coins and then deposit them in the bank and then we'll write a check from the church to an organization. But, as I was saying..."

And then Paul said, "Well, I have \$10,000 dollars in my savings account."

"Paul, I think your parents are trying to save that for your college."

"But, if people are starving, why can't I give them something to eat?"

Maybe the question isn't "If you could ask one question of God, what would it be? Maybe the question is, "If God could ask you one question, what would it be?"

Maybe it would be, "If people are starving, why can't you give them something to eat?"

Children need to be in worship, they can teach us something. Children need to be in worship so that they can know and grow in the commands of the Lord to love the Lord with all their heart, mind strength, and soul and to love their neighbor as themselves.

Children come to worship so that when faced with a God-sized problem, they might be equipped with a God-sized answer. Because there comes a time in every life when you either go small or go big. And the decision is as quick as a coin flip. Call it in the air.

We heard in our scripture how quickly Jesus called it!

The question is asked by small people, with small thoughts, the sound as low as a snake in the garden. "Teacher, we know that you are sincere, and teach the way of God in accordance with truth and show deference to no one; for you do not regard people with partiality. Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?"

It's a trap! Two horns of a dilemma! If Jesus answers, "Don't pay the tax," his ministry is over because the Romans will have him serving ten years for tax evasion. If he says, "pay the tax," he will have lost the populist vote. "What good is a Messiah who bows to the emperor?"

“Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?” Small question to ask while standing before God. But it is so easy to blow your life on small things.

We come to worship, young and old, to keep our eyes on the big vision that God has for us. Emperors come and go! Augustus, Tiberius. Who’s next? Caligula, Claudius, Nero. Come on! We should all know this. These are the mighty emperors. They ruled the mighty Roman Empire, their faces on every coin. They ran on platforms that they would keep you safe, at peace, making Rome great again. Big stuff, that in the scheme of things is small stuff. It’s easy to blow your life on small things.

To get caught up in keeping up with your neighbors. Thinking that if I can get my kids into all the right schools then they’ll be happy. Thinking that life is a series of hurdles that will look good on your resume, or you’ll be something special when you die.

Life goes by as quick as a coin flip. How are you going to live it?

Life comes at us with a question a moment. Are you going to be kind or not? Grace-filled or not? Loving or not? Patient or not? Are you going to go big or not?

Call it in the air.

As I was writing this sermon yesterday morning, a text message popped up on the corner of my computer screen. It was from Mark Dunkerley.

I don’t know if you know Mark, but I love Mark. He is CEO of the Oasis Center, a youth crises center in Nashville - big stuff. Mark and I often exchange text messages, because, when I’m having a bad day, I’ll text Mark, and he’ll share something that happened in his day that was awful or terrible. But he’ll write in such a way that it will have me laughing, and thanking the Lord that my day wasn’t as bad as his., which I realize is a very small way of looking at things.

Well, Mark’s parents have not been well. And his mom has been in hospice care. We had a conversation about whether it would be wise to go on fall break. “Mark,” I said, “Listen, you need the break. I know from my experience that you never know. “

A few days after that conversation, I got an email from Mark entitled, “You’re glad you’re not me, Volume 213.”

He wrote, “So... after an emotionally exhausting week, I decided to move forward with our Fall break and fly out tonight. This morning Luke woke up with a 103 fever. No covid, no strep, just a virus. If you are a believer in signs, you might think some force was trying to tell me something. But Beville encouraged me to go on with Hayes since changing flights was expensive, and I eagerly agreed.”

“Having said my possible last goodbyes to Mom late this afternoon, I got home in an almost delusional state of exhaustion. But later tonight I’ll be at the beach, sipping bourbon and listening to the waves. All will be right with the world.”

“Then our plane was delayed an hour and a half, which put us in the FL airport at 10:45. Hayes’ bedtime is 8:30, so I wondered if I was going to have to carry 5 feet of 9-year-old through the airport. Apparently, ours was one of three flights that arrived within ten minutes of

each other at the tiny airport, which made the rental car line resemble Franklin's barbecue in Austin during South by Southwest.”

“Undeterred, we arrived at our place a little after midnight. I couldn't remember the door code, which was pretty frustrating. Hayes is looking up at me with a strange combination of innocence and annoyance as he asks, ‘Dad, do you really not know the code to get in?’”

“After several more attempts, I hear from the inside of the unit an older man, clearly annoyed, screaming ‘You've got the wrong unit!’ I do a brief double take and look at the door to ensure that I am at the right unit, and I then proceed to inform the geezer that I am in fact at the right place. After a brief back and forth with the voice behind the door, I realize that I'm likely not going to convince the man on the inside of the unit that he needs to switch places with the guy on the outside of the unit. Sheepishly, I glance down at Hayes, whose look was a mixture of confusion, bewilderment and disappointment.”

“Again, if you were a believer in signs...Not I. So, we packed up and drove to a lovely Comfort Inn twenty minutes away. But as we waited for the receptionist to finish her phone call with her future ex-boyfriend, I finally saw a sign that could convince even the greatest of skeptics that God is a merciful God. This Comfort Inn has a 24-hour pantry that sells tall boys.”

“So here I am, the bourbon replaced by a 16 oz Bud heavy, and the crashing waves replaced by the rhythmic sounds of the guy next door snoring through the paper-thin wall. All is right in the world. Feel free to use this story on Sunday.”

Call it in the air... Turn the big stuff into small stuff and laugh at it. All is right in the world.

But as I said, he texted me yesterday morning writing, “Thanks for coming by yesterday. Mom passed away last night. I had just sat down next to her to sing Amazing Grace. She opened an eye and stopped breathing before I finished the first verse.

Call it in the air. You can be grace-filled. You can go big. Give to God the things that are God's.

Amazing grace how sweet the sound
That saved a wretch like me.
I once was lost, but now I'm found
Was blind but now I see.

When we've been here ten thousand years
Bright, shining as the sun
We've no less days to sing God's praise
Than when we first begun.

You know we live in a world with God-sized problems. Wars and rumors of wars, anger, frustration, hatred. That's why you come to worship - to stand before God not with a question - but with a life full of grace, full of glory, full of life – for God. Amen.

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