

House Money or All In?
Mark 12:35-44, 2 Corinthians 8:1-7
First U.P. Church of Crafton Heights
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OK, here's a question that I bet you didn't expect to be asked during a Presbyterian worship service: in your next friendly little game of poker, would you rather find yourself in a position where you are playing with house money or faced with having to go "all in" on a bet?

OK, before you answer, let me tell you why I'm bringing this up. Those of you who have grown up in the Presbyterian tradition are well aware that our folk have historically taken a dim view of gambling. If you've been here for a while, you know that our team is usually not doing the bingo, the fifty/fifty, or the "night at the races". We can trace that back to the "Father of Presbyterianism", John Calvin, who outlawed gambling and card-playing, saying that they were a violation of the commandment against coveting and wanting what we do not have. While I don't want to preach a whole sermon on gambling (but will if you want me to!), let me simply say that I tend to agree with old John Calvin that any form of fund-raising which is rooted in my attempt to take home more than I gave is probably not the best example of Christian stewardship.

However, the other night the Penguins were on TV, and I was so deep into my crossword puzzle that when the game ended I didn't turn off the set and before long, I was watching men play cards on live television. As I finished my puzzle, I watched these guys looking at their hands and deciding how much, if any, they would bet.

In the gambling world, if you are "playing with house money", that means that you've already won more than you started with. You came in with, say, a hundred dollars, and now you have two hundred. If you place a bet, up to a hundred dollars of your bet will be "house money" because it's money that got after you came in. If you lose it, you really haven't lost anything because you didn't have it an hour ago. Get it?

A couple of these guys I saw on TV had huge piles of house money in front of them. There was one guy, however, who had a fairly smallish stack in front of him. On one hand, he said he was going "all in". In poker, that's a pretty risky strategy. When you go "all in", you are betting everything that you have on the cards you're holding. If you win, then you get to keep your money and collect from the other players. If you lose, then you're out of money and out of the game. Someone who goes "all in" on a hand has to be supremely confident in that hand.

So, when faced with a challenging situation, would you rather be in a situation where you're playing with house money, or where you have to go all in?

As you think about that, I want us to turn our attention to Mark chapter 12. For a couple of weeks now, we've been considering the events of the week in the Temple at Jerusalem. Jesus has gone in and cleaned out the place, he has challenged the religious leaders, he has been challenged by them, and now as we finish that chapter this morning, I'd like to point out that this is the last public teaching we see in the gospel of Mark. For three years, Jesus has been wandering the countryside with his followers, performing miracles, teaching the crowds, and making disciples. Now, the public phase of his ministry ends with this teaching in the temple. Let's take a look at what happens here. As you've heard, there are three brief themes that are highlighted.

It's interesting to see that Jesus is turning the tables in this section. In the last two weeks, we've seen Jesus being questioned by one group of religious leaders after another. People are lining up to fire their questions at him. But here, Jesus takes the initiative. They think that they're done – but he isn't. In verses 35-37, Jesus gives the Sadducees a little of their own medicine. In verses 18-27, we saw how they were essentially yanking his chain by asking him a question that they thought was preposterous – they asked about heaven and the future in a way that showed their utter contempt for Jesus' teaching. Now, Jesus asks a question about their teaching in which he discounts their idea of a direct descendant of King David showing up and being a conquering military messiah who will save the Jews from the Romans. The coming Messiah, says Jesus, has to be greater than even David – in fact, even David will worship this savior.

Jesus keeps his eye on the religious leaders when he begins the next part of his teaching, wherein he warns his hearers to be careful about how much they pay attention to the people who set themselves up as religious leaders. Can you picture Jesus sitting there, gesturing to these self-important men who walk though the Temple expecting every eye to be on them? The ones who pray loud and long, sure that they are impressing the humans who are listening?

As we mentioned last week, many of these leaders were doing quite well for themselves. They made the rules, they collected the offerings, and they told people how to behave in God's eyes.

And so when Jesus sees some of these men parading up to the front of the temple and putting on a show as they drop in the money for a new roof on the temple, or maybe a scholarship in grandpa's name or a sizable donation to the organ fund, he's not really impressed with their gifts. In a way, these men are playing with house money – they are not putting anything of themselves towards either God or other humans. Whatever they give is inconsequential – it's their extra money, and they know where to get more if they need it.

But Jesus closes his public teaching by commenting on the poor widow who sneaked down the side aisle, and when she thought that no one was looking, dropping everything she had into the basket. Her offering consisted of

coins called “lepton” – which means literally “a thin one”. It was the smallest coin known to that culture, and it would buy about one slice of bread.¹ Clearly, Jesus is not impressed with the size of her gift – but he makes special note of the substance and the manner of that gift. He says that “she put in everything that she had” – if the scribes and Pharisees are playing with house money, the widow has gone all in. She is trusting God with her future as she gives in the present.

This kind of giving makes an impact, and the early Christians who lived in Macedonia must have thrilled to hear the story of this widow who gave everything. Thirty or forty years after the death of Jesus, this small community of Christians living in Greece was close to the edge, financially. They were struggling to get by – but when they heard that a famine had struck the members of the church in Jerusalem, they begged the apostles for the chance to be able to help out. They gave what they couldn’t afford because they knew that their gifts were needed. They trusted God to take care of them in the future even as they were taking care of their neighbors in the present.

These Macedonian Christians, and the poor widow, were on to an important truth that had escaped the religious leaders in the temple. We live in a world where, according to Psalm 24, everything belongs to God. The only kind of money that there is in this world is “house money.” We didn’t show up with any of it and we’re sure as shooting not leaving with any of it – whatever we have in the way of time or money or skills – it’s all given to us.

And if that’s true – if the only thing that we have is house money, then the only way to play is to go all in, all the time.

I don’t think that you’ll ever catch me down at the Casino trying the slots, but if you came to my house I would play cards with you. One of my favorite games is called Tripoly, and it’s a fun little game where we keep score with pennies. I have a big old jug of pennies that I get out, and we count out the coins in stacks of ten and start to play. Before too long, someone has a huge pile of copper in front of them and someone else is tapped out. And what always happens? The person who has the big pile slides some pennies across the table to the person who doesn’t have anything. Or maybe we just open up the bottle and get more pennies for everyone. Why? Because the pennies don’t count. Nobody is leaving with those pennies – we’re just going to put them back in the bottle and save them for the next game. So we might as well have a good time and enjoy each other’s company during the game. When you play Tripoly at my house, you can go all in every time, because it’s only house money.

I have a friend who gets this in a deep way. A couple of years ago, she told me that she was going to suspend the automatic deposits to her retirement fund because there was a great opportunity at church. She wouldn’t want

¹ The Ontario Consultants on Religious Tolerance:
<http://disc.yourwebapps.com/discussion.cgi?disc=148202;article=233607;title=OCRT%20Forum>

anyone to know her name, and she isn't looking for credit from anyone – but she is giving sacrificially – she is literally giving God her tomorrow because she is so excited about the need that she has encountered today. In our giving, we can go all in – because God is already in tomorrow.

Let me tell you about my friends Paul and Barbara. It was an amazing and humbling thing when they brought their child to me for baptism. When we talked about why they wanted to baptize this baby, Paul said, “Because she belongs to God. She is not ours. We want to give her to God.” What made that comment amazing to me was the fact that about eighteen months earlier, we'd buried their previous baby. I thought if anyone had a right to shake their fist at the sky and hold out on God, it would be Paul and Barbara – but here they were ready to go all in on their hope – because they know the truth that it's all God's. They can hope for their new baby because they know that this child is no more theirs than any previous or subsequent child – we all come from God and we all belong to God.

I saw a note this week from a man who many people would say has a right to be skeptical about trusting other people. He's a man who in many ways has given his life to being a mentor for young people. And, more than most people I know, he's been hurt by young people. He's reached out emotionally, financially, spiritually – in every way I can think of – and more often than not, he's been disappointed, betrayed, or ignored. But he still reaches out. He said, “You know, if there's a chance that I can help one kid out of the cesspool, then I want to do that, even if it means standing around in a lot of crap for a long time.” That's a man who knows something about going all in emotionally and relationally – because he knows that he has been supported and comforted by God, who in Jesus Christ, has gone all in for us.

So let me ask you again, would you rather be in a position to be playing with house money, or having to go all in? I know that on the casino floors, these are essentially opposites that are mutually exclusive. But can you see that in God's economy, these actions are not polar opposites, but rather reasonable behaviors in a world where we know that our Father cares for us day in and day out?

This week marked the one hundredth anniversary of Mark Twain's death. You may know that the author of *Tom Sawyer* and *Huck Finn* is one of my favorite writers. But did you know that he was a Presbyterian? For a time, at least, he belonged to the Lafayette Ave. Presbyterian Church in Buffalo, NY. When writing for a San Francisco newspaper, Twain said this about his churchgoing experience:

You never heard of a Presbyterian going crazy on religion. Notice us, and you will see how we do. We get up on a Sunday morning and put on the best harness we have got and trip cheerfully downtown; we subside into solemnity and enter the church; we stand up and duck our

heads and bear down on a hymn book propped on the pew in front when the minister prays; we stand up again while our hired choir are singing, and look in the hymn book and check off the verses to see that they don't shirk any of the stanzas; we sit silent and grave while the minister is preaching, and count the waterfalls and bonnets furtively, and catch flies; we grab our hats and bonnets when the benediction is begun; when it is finished, we shove off, so to speak. No frenzy, no fanaticism --no skirmishing; everything perfectly serene. You never see any of us Presbyterians getting in a sweat about religion and trying to massacre the neighbors. Let us all be content with the tried and safe old regular religions, and take no chances on wildcat.²

Is this the kind of community that we want to be? Tried and safe and unchanged? Jesus concluded his public teaching by challenging his hearers to give all of themselves. He, standing on the edge of his own passion, talked about the importance of trusting God to bring life out of death, to bring hope to seemingly hopeless situations, and to be generous in a world that takes advantage of kindness. After all, look at what all of that got him in the week to come. However, are we bold enough to believe that like the widow, like the Macedonians, like Jesus himself we can be enlivened in our worship and challenged in our faith so that we leave worship each week ready to go out and do, with God's resources, the things that God calls us to do? Can we give with God's money and hope with God's hope and serve with God's energy the world that needs to know God's love?

I want to be all in. And I want you to hold me to that. Amen.

² From "The New Wildcat Religion" in *The New Golden Era* on March 4, 1866.
<http://www.twainquotes.com/Era/eraindex.html>