

## **Pastor's Ponderings July/August 2023**

Money matters. In our society there is no getting around it. Money matters and is our primary way of measuring and signifying value. We dedicate money to things that matter to us, and we try not to give our money to things we do not care about or want to support. And, although we know it does not entirely hold true, in theory we expect to pay more for things that are comparably more valuable or of higher quality, and pay less for things that are comparable less valuable or of lesser quality. A BMW justifiably costs more than a Kia. Justin Verlander is sensibly paid more than a minor league rookie (whether it is justifiable to pay him 1,000 times more is another question). And we are willing to pay much more for our medical care than our garbage collection service because our personal health seems comparably much more important than our trash pickup. Money is a measure and a symbol of value in our culture.

Yes, I am going to ask how much you value your church. But first let me note that the way money functions in our society is not new or unique. In the gospel of Matthew, after teaching his disciples how they should pray (now known as "the Lord's Prayer") Jesus says, "No one can serve two masters... you cannot serve both God and money." Jesus's point is that God should be held as more valuable than money and you should live your life oriented around serving God rather than around serving (or pursuing) money. Clearly, in Jesus's time also money was the primary measure and symbol of value. The first "churches" were formed by believers willing to give everything to the cause: "All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need" (Acts 2:44-45). And the growth of the early church was fueled by the generosity of wealthy patrons who converted to the faith (for example Lydia, a wealthy cloth merchant in Acts 16, and "not a few of the leading women" of Thessalonica in Acts 16, "not a few women and men of high standing" in Berea in Acts 17).

I believe only a very few of us are called to give all we have for the sake of our faith (such as living the life of a missionary, or monk, nor nun). And most of us are not sufficiently wealthy to serve as patrons able to underwrite buildings or other major initiatives. But I do believe all of us should consider carefully how we are spending our lives and what our actual values are in practice. If money is a measure of value, what truly are our values judging by where and how we spend our money. How much are you willing to pay for a car (or two)? How much will you pay for a concert ticket or a seat at a football game? How much per year do you spend on leisure activities or on goods and services for pleasure rather than to meet an actual need? How much do you contribute to charitable causes? How much do you contribute to the church? Money is the measure of value. What do you really value? What are your values?

It is an undeniable fact that fewer and fewer people value the existence of churches or other communities of faith at all. I do believe churches are valuable to both individuals and to our community and society as a whole. And I believe our church in particular is of great value. How valuable it is and what of value it is able to provide to individuals and to our

community and society is up to you. The church is the people. The value of the church is the collective valuing of the people who value it.

A follow-on question to this, to be pursued at another time, is: what of value are we really providing to our members and to our community, and how can we strengthen those aspects of our church which are truly valuable and which best express our values?

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