

St. David's Presbyterian Church
St. John's, NL
"Death, Taxes, and Leadership"
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Well, we made it through another election. The results weren't shocking. There is some change, but the majority government continues to be a majority government. People are talking about the fact that across the six provincial and territorial elections that took place in the last couple weeks, there was quite a low turnout. Some argue that there is more change in the province that didn't even have a provincial election but the PCs in Alberta did elect their first woman premier, who sounds quite different from her predecessors.

You know I'm not here to talk politics. I'll leave that to those of you who are more capable in that area than me. But I am here to talk about life certainties. You know I talk here often about death, not to be morbid, but to gain spiritual perspective. Steve Jobs, the famous Apple CEO who died in the last couple of weeks, spoke to Stanford graduates at their convocation in 2005. I don't know if you saw the several clips from that commencement speech on the news. Let me encourage you to watch in on YouTube in its entirety, 14:34, because in the midst of his battle with cancer, he learned a great lesson. I am sorry it takes such health loss to teach such lessons. Sometimes we only learn once we have lost something or someone. He said that it was when his life was in question from a diagnosis of a rare form of pancreatic cancer in 2004, he truly learned to value each day, each hour, to know for sure that he loved what he was doing at Apple. It was then he knew he was fulfilling what he was supposed to be doing in this life. I'm summarizing and not doing a very good job of it. The exact quote is: "If you live each day as it were your last, someday you will certainly be right." He said that at fifty, he had lived each day of his life since he had heard this quote at age 17, looked in the mirror, and asked himself, "if this were to be my last day, would I still be doing what I am doing?" And if the answer was, "no," he knew he had to change something in his life.

I think this is the hardest part for a preacher. I used to think that my sermons would change people's minds, and even more foolishly, change people's lives. I realize now, more than ever, that this is God's work, not mine. I can't even debate well with some of you, because frankly, you are better speakers than I am. We have many people here who have given lectures and

talks their whole lives on many, important subjects. I would like to think that as I stand here today, I too can be a voice in your life for good, for exploration in a God-ward direction, for behavioral change toward action in line with God's best for you. I know I am but one voice in a sea of voices.

The one voice we all look forward to hearing each week is God's voice. We hear God's voice as we read the Scriptures. We hear God's voice as we seek to please the One who gives us life. Step 11 in the 12 step programs is instructive, and comes with experience and maturity. "We sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God, praying only for knowledge of God's will, and the power to carry that out."

I think that's what is meant in Exodus 33 when Moses asks for the Presence of God to go with him and with the people. Moses wants to continue to experience the conscious contact with God that 12 step people rely upon. It is the power to change broken, addicted lives into healthy, giving lives. Moses even prays for God's glory, but this is too much, so God gives him a greater vision of who He is, but not the whole, because he couldn't take it.

So each of us needs an experience of God to carry us forward in life. We need the presence of God, remembering he is with us in Jesus Christ. We need the glory of God, changing our desires to God's own, changing not just our speech, but also our actions. If we have this ongoing desire to learn, to humble ourselves before God, to pray, then perhaps we are also being called to lead. Leadership, as we look for new elders here, first and foremost, is a willingness to follow God, no matter where that takes us. It is both a risky and a costly business. It often feels like a wilderness, rather than a refreshing oasis. But it is in the desert that we learn to follow.

There are times in the church where we feel we are being tested. We are tested by our temptations and inner feelings of shame and guilt. We are tested by other's comments about us, to us, expecting both attitudes and actions that we may not be able to accomplish. We are tested by the cultural norms and mores that more and more seem to be out of synch with Christianity, with following Jesus. Church? Why would you want to go there? These are common questions today.

In fact, Reg Bibby, the famous Canadian sociologist, says that people don't want to find a church. They are not looking for a church. They are looking for ministry. The question is, "Are we providing such?" On the back of the

bulletin we have been listing all the regular groups for you to consider whether you might at least try visiting one or more of them, to help you in your faith. And if you have other ideas for groups, perhaps we can help you by providing a leader, or helping you in your leadership.

This is a time for us to be asking ourselves, "What makes a good leader?" It is the desire to serve, that comes from the Lord who serves us. It is the desire to learn, from the Lord who teaches those who are willing to be taught. It is the desire to do what the Lord says, once we understand what he has said.

Jesus was tested in his ministry. Perhaps you know the story that we read in the Gospel, from Matthew 22. The Pharisees wanted to trap him by asking an either/or question. The question was simply "Is it right to pay taxes or not?" All the people listening knew it was a military, occupation government who were against their religion. They knew that if Jesus said "yes," that they would question him about supporting an evil government. And if he said, "no," then he would be encouraging people to break the law, and not submit to the governing powers, which is against the Scriptures. So they had him in a bind where he could not give a correct answer.

It's like the classic question, "When did you stop beating your wife?" There's no way to answer the question without hurting yourself.

Now the question of paying taxes is not just an ancient one. Apparently it is a central issue in Europe today. In Greece and other European countries, apparently people feel they can choose to not pay their income taxes at the federal level, or their property taxes at the local level. And the governments choose not to enforce such taxes. So there is my simple analysis of the debt crisis in Europe today. It is more complicated than that. But this goes to the heart of how countries function financially.

Jesus chose to avoid the philosophical debates around taxes, just as we often avoid the philosophical debates around death. Death and taxes are the two certainties of life, so they say. Jesus rather asks for a coin. I thought was brilliant. It is the panhandlers' response to the philosophical debate: "Spare change?" And Jesus asks the simplest of questions. Just as he does still today with us...Do you love me? He asks, "Whose picture is on the money, and why is that picture there?" It is the Emperor's picture and he is the one

to whom the money goes. Well then, Jesus says, give him what he wants, and give God what God wants.

So many people think church is mainly about giving money. Someone who doesn't often go to church will think all we do is look for money. And we do look for money, to keep the buildings going, to keep me and my family in food, clothing and housing, to keep a part time Administrator and a very part time Music Director. And we are grateful for each of these people who could find work that pays better. We would like to upgrade buildings which are between 40 and 50 years old now. So yes, we do need money to operate. And we will continue to keep you informed about this.

But this is not the main function here, fund raising. It is not. It is following the God who gives us life. And if you can help, with your leadership, with your gifts, with your resources, please do. We believe you would be doing so unto God, more than for our sake.

Let's pray about it.

Let us pray.