My Brothers and Sisters in Christ, let us pray. Our Lord of our hearts, minds, spirits, and souls, may the words of my mouth and the meditation of all of our hearts always be acceptable in your sight, our strength and our Redeemer, Amen.

Jesus asked for a denarius. He’s not interested in how the Romans collect taxes; indeed, Jesus doesn’t really show an interest at all in how political systems or economic systems organize themselves. God might be described as the ultimate kind-hearted benevolent dictator. The early disciples and communities of faith tried both capitalism and communism. Jesus’ concern is not with the power dynamics that accompany any particular system; we’ve talked about that. It’s human nature draws us in to hold onto power at ever increasing costs and antics at the expense of others, so Jesus sees that it is the temptation within us that forbids fairness in any particular political, communal, ecclesial or economic system. And yet, Jesus asks for a denarius, and the smiling Pharisees can’t wait for his answer to the question, “how much should we give?”

Stewardship Sunday asks the same question: How much should we give?

And even though the question is framed in terms of giving, living here in America and especially in Live Free of Die country, we sometimes hear, “how much do we owe?” That’s a question we are very familiar with: there are any number of fees we pay, and a formula for calculating those fees. Percentage of sales price. Number of hours worked. Combination of costs of things and a profit margin on top of it. We can figure out most things, for sure, short of hospital charges, for which there seems to be highly variable formulas that are, paradoxically, inverse to one’s ability to pay said fee.

But I digress. Fees are known to us, and loved or loathed. But at least we know what we owe.

And that’s where Jesus comes in to once again get us thinking and amazes the priests. I think Jesus is trying to ask them to try and understand the difference between what is owed and what is given. Jesus came into this world to announce the unfolding grace of God’s Kingdom, right here, right now.

So let’s understand what that means: the Kingdom of God isn’t heaven. That’s the place of angels and saints. But neither is the Kingdom of God how we are organized and our patterns of behavior today. Jesus came to tell us that he is here to show us that there is another way of living that God wants, but that is not all that popular with the ones holding onto power. And he repeatedly shows what that is in love, healing, preaching, praying, and generally saying that as God gives, so should we give. Freely. Joyfully. Fully.

We should not ***owe*** when it comes to God. That’s how the world works, using us as a resource. Human Resources is what they call people at a company, as if we were one more thing to input into a product. Jesus comes and says that we are so much more than that. We are not a thing. God does not ever refer to us as a thing, because we are in relationship with God, and God with creation. Jesus seeks to change the conversation from the burden of owing to the freedom of giving.

But that also means that there is no formula, no method, no way to quantify our obligation to God. “Give to God what is God’s”, says Jesus. But we have to do the hard work of figuring that out for ourselves. Kingdom living says that as we have come to know God, joy, spirit, and love, so should we return that in kind. What does that look like, Pastor Mark? How much is that? How much is too little, or not enough?

I’ll leave you with these final thoughts.

God doesn’t “thing” his people to tell them what is owed. Consistent with Kingdom living, neither does our Church in our faith tradition. Sure, we understand what we owe for things we need like light, heat, water. But we also see how our community is coming back from COVID. How a food pantry gives a little more in time and food helping area families. How the closure of Me & Ollie’s gave rise to community gathering and spirit in our coffee hour and gathering space. How a scouting once left for dead on the New Hampshire seacoast is now 39 kids.

How we gather is part of giving. And so as we better understand Jesus’ answer, let’s understand how we can more engage in Kingdom living. What is it we can give, more joyfully and fully? How much of our whole selves, our time, talent, energy, and rest, are attuned toward God’s mercy, justice and love? We probably haven’t asked ourselves these questions in this way in a long time. There are no pat answers, and that might be uncomfortable for many of us. But it’s so much more interesting than being reduced to a formula of what we owe.

Give the Jesus answer this year. Give back to God what has been received into your whole self.

Thanks be to God, Amen.