

“Thriving in Community” by Pastor Leah Rosso
Week 2, October 18, 2026
Matthew 22: 15-22

Padraig O'Touma, an author and poet, has put together a few compilations of poetry that I have enjoyed. And before each poem, he shares a little anecdote. In his book, “44 Poems on Being with Each Other” he shares this story:

A friend of mine was walking in a Melbourne Park. She saw a woman sitting alone on a bench and — she wasn't sure why — went immediately and purchased flowers for the stranger.

*My friend presented the flowers to the woman on the bench, somewhat apologetically.
Nobody knows it's my birthday, the woman said, and how did you know pansies are my favorite?*

Of course my friend didn't know. Of course she had no certitude. Of course. Also, of course she felt something, and of course her response was filled with the generosity for which her friends love her.

All of this happened. I do not know how.

The story makes me wonder - who was impacted the most by this small act of generosity? The one who received it or the one who gave it? Which part is the most surprising - that someone would pay attention to a quiet nudge to be generous? Or that the recipient would give such meaning to it? O'Touma ends with “All of this happened, I do not know how.” but actually, he gives us a massive clue in his reflection about his friend when he says, “of course her response was filled with the generosity for which her friends love her.”

O'Touma's friend is known for her generosity; it turns out, he does know how it happened — even if she had no idea the impact it would make. This is not a mystery. She has made a practice in her life of being generous.

John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist movement, very much saw generosity as a practice; a spiritual discipline. And he was very generous. At a young age he decided how much he needed in order to live, and then he lived on that his whole life, giving away anything he made above that sum. While the world tells us with every commercial, every ad, every billboard that we want to make more money in order to gain more things and have bigger stuff, Wesley saw the opportunity to gain more

money as an opportunity to be more generous. He thought that as people of faith, we need to talk more about generosity and money, not less. In fact, he thought that Christian leaders who thought that money only corrupts and shouldn't be talked about at all, ridiculous in their assumptions. To Wesley, money was a tool that could do a great many good things:

In the hands of God's children, [money] is food for the hungry, drink for the thirsty, raiment for the naked... By it we may supply the place of a husband to the widow, and of a father to the fatherless; we may be a defense for the oppressed, a means of health to the sick, of ease to them that are in pain. It may be as eyes to the blind, as feet to the lame; yea, a lifter up from the gates of death!

Wesley's community understood wealth and riches to be evil, so when he preached that people should earn all they can, he was considered fairly radical. I haven't heard many people in our society claim that money is bad; but I still think his suggestion that we make more money in order to be generous is still pretty radical. And Wesley believed in earning all we can within certain parameters — like following God's call in our lives first; not giving up too much to earn money, like our health, our soul, or our relationship with our neighbor; and always earn money so much as it honors God. It may sound foreign to think of how your day job honors God, but Wesley believed that this was extremely important, especially since we spend so much time in our work places.

Wesley also believed in saving money so as not to be in debt. To this day, when the candidates for ministry in the Methodist Church come before the Bishop, she asks them all kinds of questions to inquire about the state of their souls, and one of those questions is, "Are you in debt so as to embarrass yourself or your congregation?" And the expectation is that all of us can say, with honesty and integrity, no we are not in debt. In our world that encourages us to borrow money all of the time in order to live a lifestyle outside of our means, this too is countercultural. What would it look like for all of us to choose to live not only within our means, but actually below our means so that we can be generous?

I was just listening to an interview the other day with John Cena, the actor and retired professional wrestler. I will admit, I wasn't planning to listen to John Cena - the podcast I was listening to began the next episode automatically and I was mowing the lawn and didn't want to quit yet. But what I heard, surprised me. Cena talked about growing up with a Dad who was in real estate and having all of the luxuries you want as a kid - the house, the yard, the pool. When one day his Dad was let go and it all went away and they really struggled. So now, as an adult, even though he makes plenty of money, he has made sure that while he does enjoy some luxuries with what

he makes, that he doesn't let himself get used to too much extravagance and he saves a lot of what he earns because he knows that he can't take any of it for granted. I know Cena's scale of luxury and mine are most likely extremely different, and yet I hear Wesley's wisdom in John Cena — there's no reason to live beyond our means; there's often no reason to live to our means; living below our means and recognizing that everything is temporary has a lot of wisdom in it.

And, of course, Wesley believed in giving all we can — in practicing generosity in all times and in all places in order to care for our own souls and to care for our neighbors. Earn all we can, always in ways that honor God; save all we can, understanding that this is not permission to hoard, but rather a wise practice; and then give all we can — being generous with all that we have because it all comes from God.

Which brings us to our scripture this morning. You should know that the Pharisees and the Herodians, both Jewish religious leaders in Jesus' day, despised each other. Pharisees were widely known to be against Roman rule, choosing to very carefully not work with the Roman government. Herodians, on the other hand, saw the benefit of working with Rome, and so often worked with them to get what they wanted. Both being leaders of the Jewish people, there were fierce debates about what was more faithful to God. The one thing they seem to agree on, is that Jesus is a threat to both of them. So they go to Jesus, in an attempt to trick him, and ask him whether it's lawful to pay taxes to Caesar. If he says yes, siding with the Herodians, he will make most of his followers upset and it will contradict some of his teachings about siding with the oppressed and the poor. If he says not to pay taxes, siding with the Pharisees, he will be publicly encouraging people to disobey the law, and could be arrested on the spot. Their whole goal is to trick Jesus.

And before we get to Jesus' response, I want us just to pause for a moment right there. Jesus has been preaching and teaching; feeding and healing; sharing words of God's light and love; quoting the scriptures in ways that were bringing people to God. And these specific Pharisees and Herodians are so upset by Jesus' popularity and goodness and influence on the people, that they are willing to befriend one another in order to trip up Jesus. Does that sound generous? They are not there because they are curious. They are not there because they want to encourage or affirm or even because they are concerned and want to solve a problem. They are there to trick Jesus; to bring him down; to stop what he has started. So what do we know about them? We know that in many ways, they've already lost. Their attitudes and motives show us that their concern for their people and how to lead them well is no longer at the forefront of what they want to do, even if it was when they originally became leaders.

And how does Jesus respond? First, he asks for a Denarius, which is the coin that bears Caesar's image. And when they take one out for all to see Caesar's image on the coin, he says to them, "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's." Everyone can see what is Caesar's, right? He had them bring it out to show them. It sounds like he is saying that they should pay taxes. But then Jesus, knowing that these religious leaders believe strongly that each human face bears God's image, reminds them what their lives are for — to reflect the image of God in all that they do; in all of who they are; in all of the ways they use their money. They are thinking so small - how do we get rid of this thorn in our side; and Jesus responds by reminding them what our calling as God's children is — to reflect God's image in all that we do, including in all the ways we use our money.

As a church community, through our visioning and strategic planning, we have been putting goals and intentions around what we want ministry to look like for the coming years. We have been restructuring our facility — investing in solar panels that are coming soon and an LED Wall that will be installed this week and LED lights that will be coming. We have plans to create more intentional systems so that we can be more effective in the ways we get people connected and trained and working together to make a difference in our community. We are trying to make our carbon footprint smaller and our community impact larger, all while paying staff living wages and offering ways for all of us to be generous to our partner ministries too. In many ways, we began with the end in mind — who do we want to be in 5-10 years, and then worked backwards. It's one of the reasons we invite any of you who are guests to pick a partner organization and together we'll be generous to others — because we know we need partners to live out God's love, and we hope you'll be empowered to join us in being generous, even if it starts that small because we know that with God's help, we will thrive in this community and we want to be part of helping everyone in the wider community thrive too.

Generosity doesn't have to be a mystery. By beginning with the end in mind, with Jesus' words that we all belong to God, we can work our way backwards and start by being generous today and choosing to make steps towards greater generosity tomorrow. Wesley knew that our souls depended on the practice of generosity. May we be open to recognizing the opportunities we have and practicing at every chance, so that we can be as generous with God as God is with us!