

Preachers never know how their sermons will be interpreted or what kind of activity, if any, their words will inspire. The same is true for artists and filmmakers. In one of the more bizarre news stories from last week, a man charged the green at a golf tournament and threw a hot dog at Tiger Woods. Even more bizarre was the man's reason for the weenie attack.

Brandon Kelly, the hotdog thrower, said that he's a fan of Woods and got the idea after watching "Drive" -- a recently released movie starring Ryan Gosling as a stunt driver who moonlights as a getaway driver.

"I threw the hot dog toward Tiger Woods because I was inspired by the movie 'Drive,'" Kelly said. "As soon as the movie ended, I thought to myself, 'I have to do something courageous and epic. I have to throw a hot dog on the green in front of Tiger.'" Oookayy....

Although I cannot control the outcome, I intend to preach a short and straightforward sermon about money this morning. We're in the middle of our annual stewardship campaign, and each year I try to address our relationship with money through the lens of the gospel. After all, the Bible does talk quite a bit about money, just as most of us think quite a bit about it, as well.

A new study from BYU suggests that couples that think about money a lot tend to be unhappier. Couples were asked to react to the statement: *"money and things have never been important to me"*. Those who disagreed with the statement tended to score low on questions that tested emotional maturity and responsiveness to their partner. The lead author of the study said *"materialism was also linked to less effective communication, higher levels of negative conflict, lower relationship satisfaction and less marriage stability."*

Well, this is really no newsflash, is it? The Bible does say that the love of money is the root of all evil. Jesus tells stories of people who are wrapped around the axle due to their finances as opposed to those who do not worry about what they will eat and what they will wear. But don't worry now about what you will hear. This sermon is not about the evils of money:

it is not an “Occupy Christ Church” sermon. Nor is it a sermon designed to lay on the guilt.

When I was first ordained, my father-in-law, who called me “P-Boy”, would say to me before I preached, “*Make ‘em dig deep, P-Boy. Make em’ dig deep.*” I wasn’t exactly sure what kind of digging I was supposed to initiate, but of course he was talking about people digging deep down in their pockets to surrender their money to the usher’s plate. My father-in-law grew up in a church where the offering plate went around not once, but twice or even three times if the plate wasn’t full enough. So you had to dig deep to fill up that plate!

It seems that churches too, like couples, are also occupied with money. Just last week I got this inspiring email, personally addressed to me. “*Dear Pastor,*” it said, “*I’ve been to dozens and dozens of church services over the last few years, and everyone of them included a time of offering. **Your church depends on this moment to pay bills and do ministry, but it’s boring and people don’t participate.** You’re passing the plate, but people are letting it pass by.*” All I had to do was buy this guy’s giving talk and I’d see a dramatic increase in giving! Who knew? All I have to do is see you not as people, but as pockets.

Like one minister, in the middle of his church’s building renovation, who said to his congregation, “the good news is that we’ve got plenty of money to finish our building. The bad news is that it’s all in your pockets.”

Thankfully, Jesus sees people as people, not as pockets. I’m not even sure Jesus had pockets. I guess those robes back then had pockets, but I’m not sure. Even if He had pockets, he didn’t appear to have much in them. You’ll note that when he’s asked a question about money in today’s gospel, he has to request a coin. He didn’t just dig deep into his pockets to get it out.

He said a lot of different things about pockets though. To the rich young ruler he said, “sell all you have and give your money to the poor, and follow me.” But in one of his parables, He applauded a conniving money manager who swindled his boss by claiming his bosses’ loans at 50 cents on the dollar. When it comes to money, you can’t pin Jesus down.

Which is clearly what his enemies, the Herodians and the Pharisees, are trying to do to him in today's gospel. After some unctuous flattery, they try to snare him with a question about whose pocket money belongs in – “Is it lawful to pay taxes to the Emperor or not?” Jesus' enemies are trying to set him up. If he answers “no”, then the Roman authorities will snare him for tax evasion. But, if he answers “yes”, then the Jewish authorities will nail him as a blasphemer. For the Emperor saw himself as divine, and as every Jew knows, there is no God but the One God.

Jesus gives his enemies one of the greatest non-answers of all time: render unto Caesar that which is Caesar's and to God that which is God's. If this is puzzling to you, it is supposed to be. This is not Jesus' theological manifesto on the relationship between Church and State, nor is it his definitive word on our use of money. He's not exactly saying, “I didn't inhale”, as “Slick Willy” once said, but He's in the same ballpark. Jesus is simply outfoxing his opponents. He wouldn't be coerced into an answer.

So, what are we to say about money? Jesus' non-answer here is an answer. There are no simple rules to follow. Yes, it is good to tithe, to give away 10% of your income. But, that is no guarantee of your emotional maturity, relationship satisfaction, or your heart being in the right place. As Paul says in his first letter to the Corinthians, if I give away all that I possess (like the command to the rich young ruler) and have not love, I gain nothing.

And just as Jesus wouldn't be coerced into an answer, none of us wants to be coerced to do anything, especially to give money. It is no wonder that my father-in-law was not a churchgoer as an adult. If every time you come to church to hear some presumably good news, you are asked to dig deep, then you will quickly find your good news elsewhere, and at a cheaper price.

It seems to me that Paul perfectly articulates the gospel approach to money in his second letter to the Corinthians. “*Each one must give as he has decided in his heart, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.*” Again, no one wants to be coerced. With money, as in all things, coercion always backfires. A coerced giver is rarely a cheerful giver. He may even throw hot dogs.

Jesus Christ went to the cross willingly, not under coercion. As he said “*No one takes my life from me, but I lay it down of my own accord.*” And He died of his own accord to give us new hearts, not to-do lists. And sometimes

in response to what He has freely given to us, those hearts are moved to freely and cheerfully give.

The gospel always moves us from obligation to desire, from “have to” to “want to.” Think about the Christmas presents that you give. There’s little joy in the ones you feel like you have to give, either for the giver or the receiver.

Someone told me that there are 2 kinds of people in this world. Those who wake up and say, “Good Morning, Lord!” and those who wake up and said, “Good Lord. It’s morning.” Funny. The truth is we’re both of those all the time, sometimes cheerful givers, sometimes grumpy hoarders. But in God’s eyes, seen through the lens of grace, you are never a pocket to be coerced. You’re just a person to be loved.

Amen.