

## “30 Pieces of Silver”

By Rev. Elizabeth D. McLean, Prince of Peace Presbyterian Church  
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Based upon Matthew 26:14-16

In 1967, an English philosopher named Phillipa Foot proposed a thought experiment which has come to be known as “the trolley problem.”<sup>1</sup> Imagine you are driving a trolley when you discover that the brakes have gone out. You can’t stop the trolley, but you do have a working lever which will allow you to choose the track on which it will speed forward. Immediately ahead of you the track splits. On one branch you see a person on the tracks, and on the other you see five. You can’t stop or warn any of them. So, the question is: “Do you choose to kill one person or five?” Most people, when presented with this morbid moral dilemma say, “If I had no choice, I would kill the one to save the five.” But that’s only the beginning of the experiment. Then moral philosophers started switching up the facts. Would your answer be the same if the five were people you thought of as enemies or the one was your mother, child, or spouse? What if your trolley was carrying critical medical supplies to save thousands of lives and the way of the five would get you to your destination faster? What if the races or ages of the people on the tracks differed? What if the five were all criminals and the one was a great scientist, artist, or author? All of these scenarios feel like impossible, and terrible choices, of course. But that’s sort of the point of moral philosophy, to force us to think about what our values really are, and whether they are consistent regardless of the circumstances.

Recently, because the world is now presenting humanity with so many real and difficult choices, a political cartoonist, I’m not sure which one because I couldn’t find a credit line, created still a new variation of the trolley problem. In the cartoon there is only one track, which lots of people are tied to, that trails off into the distance, and the caption reads “You can stop the trolley any time, but doing so will cause the trolley company to lose profits.” Hmmmm. Now by sharing this I’m not trying to be political divisively at a time when everyone is already on a raw nerve, or to claim that the decisions that the powers-that-be around the world have to make right now are as simple as people versus profits. It’s not that simple. Companies provide jobs that feed people and enable them to have health care and homes and any number of other things. There are good companies and bad people, bad companies and good people. I know that and you know that. But tonight is the night the liturgical calendar sets aside for us to face hard truths about ourselves, and my point in raising this classic hypothetical is that one of those truths is that money sometimes blinds us to the moral implications of claiming Christ is our Lord. Tonight, of all nights, God invites us to think about the way we do the math on the hard problems of life and be honest about who or what we value most.

According to *Matthew*, Judas betrayed Jesus for thirty pieces of silver. Thirty coins were enough for him to turn over Jesus to the authorities who felt it was better to have Jesus on the tracks than to stop their trolley. It’s funny, and quite revealing actually that when most people, including me, learn this about Judas, their first response is to ask: “How much was that worth back then?” Was it the equivalent of Judas’ winning the lottery or the equivalent of him turning

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<sup>1</sup> See <https://trolleyproblem.net>.

in the Messiah for the cost of a movie ticket? That latter would make him particularly evil to us, you see, and the former, more understandable.

Over the ages people have tried to answer this question in different ways. Some people have said thirty pieces of silver today would be worth about \$6-10,000 based upon the going price for silver. Others say, assuming the coins were Tyrian shekels, and each coin weighed approximately 14 grams and was made of 94% pure silver as they were back then, then those thirty pieces today would be worth between \$185 and \$216 dollars today.<sup>2</sup> Still others have said the only way to compare is to consider the purchasing power the money had in Jesus' day. If the Temple tax was a half shekel, which was worth about two day's wages for the average Joe, then thirty pieces of silver was the equivalent of 120 days' salary.<sup>3</sup> We can translate that into modern terms. In the fourth quarter of 2019, the median weekly earning of full-time wage earners was \$936.<sup>4</sup> If we assume a 6-day workweek, which was the norm in Jesus' day, that would be \$156 per day. So, Judas was given the equivalent of about \$18,720, which is slightly less than you would need, according to Kelly Bluebook, to buy a Toyota Corolla without any bells or whistles.

That reminds me of a variation on the trolley experiment by controversial ethicist Peter Singer. He said to imagine that you own very expensive car that is your pride and joy.<sup>5</sup> You saved for ages to get it; you wash it and wax it every week. Then one day it stalls just when you are crossing a railroad track. When you leap out to push it off the track because a train is coming, you notice a toddler is also on the track. You have time to save only one, your car or the child, which one would you save? When people answered "the child of course," Singer used to respond, "If you are willing to sacrifice your car to save the child you can see, why aren't you willing to do the same for a child you cannot see?" Singer doesn't make a lot of friends asking questions like these. They are really irritating and seem unfair. But they are important to consider nevertheless, because they force us to consider what our treasure is and where our hearts are. They force us to consider the distant consequences of all of our choices.

The truth is that we don't know exactly how much the money was worth to Judas, not just because it's tricky to calculate but because we don't know what was going on in his heart. And in the end, it may not matter because Matthew may not have wanted us to take the amount literally in the first place. According to *Exodus*, thirty pieces of silver was the price that you would have to pay if your ox accidentally gored someone else's slave to death. (Ex. 21:32). So, Matthew might have been trying to say that in the end Judas treated Jesus like a disposable slave. When the prophet Zechariah was paid thirty pieces of silver for a shepherding job he once did, he said he was "paid handsomely," but in a way that was clearly dripping with sarcasm. He didn't appreciate being treated like a slave. (Zech. 11:4-14). But he also could have been using the

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<sup>2</sup> See e.g. <https://theuijunkie.com/judas-christ-thirty-pieces-of-silver-todays-money/>;  
<https://www.quora.com/How-much-were-the-30-pieces-of-silver-Judas-received-to-betray-Jesus-worth-in-todays-money>

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> *Median weekly earnings of full-time workers increased 4.0 percent in 2019*, U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Jan. 24, 2020; retrieved April 6, 2020 from

<https://www.bls.gov/opub/ted/2020/median-weekly-earnings-of-full-time-workers-increased-4-point-0-percent-in-2019.htm>

<sup>5</sup> In Singer's hypothetical your car is an uninsured Bugatti which you spent your life savings on to buy. See Singer, Peter, "The Singer Solution to World Poverty" in THE NEW YORK TIMES, Sept. 5, 1999, available at <https://www.nytimes.com/1999/09/05/magazine/the-singer-solution-to-world-poverty.html>

phrase metaphorically because in ancient Sumerian culture, which influenced all of the biblical cultures that came after it, “30 pieces of silver” was the ancient, metaphorical equivalent of “diddly squat.”<sup>6</sup>

Whether the thirty pieces of silver meant everything or nothing, Judas still betrayed Jesus for money and self-interest. He had seen Jesus heal the sick, raise the dead, calm the seas, and feed thousands with almost nothing. He knew Jesus could speak directly with God and was dedicated to saving the world through love; yet he still betrayed him, and we do too. We betray him by thinking as Judas did, that we know better how things are, need to be, or should be, and we betray him by sacrificing the people he lived and died for on the altar of the economy and personal desire.

Now I’m not saying we all do this consciously; we don’t. There’s no doubt in my mind that everyone in this congregation would pick the toddler over their car, and might even sacrifice their lives trying to derail the trolley before it hit anyone. But that doesn’t change the fact that we participate in and benefit from an economy which is driven by the kind of cost-benefit analysis that uses money to define what’s moral instead of morality to define how money should be spent. Corporations and the government both use something called the “value of a statistical life,” or VSL, to calculate whether policy changes and regulations are worth implementing or not, or new product development is worth it – not worth it morally, but financially.<sup>7</sup> Profit versus liability is the name of the game. The VSL is valued between \$6.5 and \$10 million per person depending upon which federal agency you consult. But that doesn’t mean that the powers-that-be or corporations which rely on the VSL actually see all people as being worth \$10 million-a-piece. They don’t. Immigrant farmers are not valued as much as Fortune 500 CEOs; refugees are not offered \$10 million-a-piece when one of their loved ones dies in ICE custody. Businesses do not calculate the value of foreign workers the same way they calculate the value of those in their own nations. Pharmaceutical companies do not calculate the suffering of those who need the medicine as much as their projected profits from making it. And almost nobody calculates seriously the costs we should assume today in order to benefit millions in the future.

Right now, this horrible, scary pandemic is revealing the ugly, inequitable math that undergirds our economy in particularly stark ways. There are people talking seriously about the need to sacrifice the elderly for the sake of the young to get the economy going (although interestingly, not using the same argument to promote the urgency of responding to climate change to save the young.)<sup>8</sup> There are people who are being sacrificed to provide essential services to others who are not getting what they need to be safe because of partisan politics. There are people who are now deemed essential, who up until the pandemic were looked down upon and treated as totally inconsequential, who still can’t count on a living wage, health care, and more. There are people being endangered because they do not have the luxury of being able

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<sup>6</sup> Bible Gateway, cf. Zechariah Chapter 11,

<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Zechariah+11&version=LEB;NOG;NET&interface=amp>.

<sup>7</sup> Kniesner, Thomas J., Viscusi, W. Kip, “*The Value of a Statistical Life*,” in Forthcoming, Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Economics and Finance, Vanderbilt Law Research Paper No. 19-15, May 16, 2019, available at [https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract\\_id=3379967](https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3379967)

<sup>8</sup> See e.g., “*Why ‘choosing’ between the elderly and the economy is a phony, barbaric choice*,” THE WASHINGTON POST, Op-Ed by Editorial Board, Mar. 27, 2020 (citing comments by Lt. Gov. Dan Patrick of Texas).

to quarantine or the ability to get medical care, while others of us are resting safely in our homes baking too much. In other words, our values are showing, and the sight isn't pretty. The inequities of our choices are glaring, as is our love of profit and personal control over compassion in many cases. In the economy of the kingdom of God the least are blessed before the greatest, strangers are cared for as we would care for ourselves, widows and orphans are fed, and even the earth gets Sabbath rest. What is the real value of what we have embraced to do things our way instead of Jesus' way? What is the cost?

Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann once wrote, "The Bible attests that money and possessions are not inanimate objects. They are rather forces of desire that evoke lust and 'love' in a way that compels devotion and eventually servitude... [Silver and gold] are not innocent but are in fact addictive and compel loyalty that rivals loyalty to God. Thus Moses [warned] Israel that the worship of such possessions [could] talk Israel out of covenantal faith."<sup>9</sup> Tonight, in reenacting the Last Supper, we celebrate the new covenant made possible through Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. It is a covenant based upon loving God with heart, mind, soul, and strength, and loving neighbor (all our neighbors) as ourselves. It is a covenant grounded in generosity and compassion not profitability and expediency. As we are confronted with the darkness of the cross tonight, therefore, may the meal provoke us to confront not just the darkness in our world caused by the pandemic, but also revealed by it. After the pandemic is over, there will be plenty of rebuilding and restoration to be done. Whether we go back to the old way, or learn from this time the need to embrace a new way, will depend in large part upon how many people are more invested in the trolley than the people on the track, in God's way or their own. It will depend upon how many people speak out, and how many remain silent. As we contemplate that day, may the Spirit help us to do the cost-benefit analysis as our Savior would have us do. Amen.

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<sup>9</sup> Brueggemann, Walter, *Money and Possessions*, INTERPRETATION: Resources for the use of Scripture in the Church (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2016), 8.