

Pentecost 20

October 18, 2020

Give to God What Belongs To God

Matthew 22:15-22

“Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar or not?” I’m reminded of the propositions in our local elections worded to confuse us, to turn our brains around make us question what we know to be true. Jesus, of course, understood, but let’s place ourselves in the position of the disciples, not the cleverest group of fellows ever, standing by and listening to Jesus get this question from the Pharisees. The Pharisees felt threatened by Jesus as a matter of faith; he called their practices into question and threatened the religious status quo.

The party of King Herod, that monarch propped up by the invading Romans, had another set of interests. Their power lay in their support of Rome. If they heard Jesus speak against paying taxes to the emperor, they would have to prosecute him. So, the Pharisees cleverly brought them along, certain that one way or another they could discredit Jesus. If he supported taxes, he would let down his followers, who hailed from an area known for its revolutionary feelings toward Rome. If he didn’t, he might wind up in jail.

If I’m a disciple, standing by and listening, I am wondering how my teacher will get himself out of this one. Then Jesus asks to see a coin. But Jesus, aware of the malice, said, “Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites? Show me the coin used for the tax.” They brought him a denarius. Then he said to them, “Whose head is this, and whose title?” Ah, the disciples must have thought with relief. He can’t be tricked so easily!!

The pharisees answered, “the emperor’s.” Then Jesus said to them, “Give therefore to Caesar the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s”. When the Pharisees heard this, they were amazed, and they

left him and went away.

Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and unto God the things that are God's. It's funny how I remember the King James version of some of these passages! Render unto Caesar, heard the disciples, and they thought, "Phew! Jesus told them!!"

But he is telling us, too! It's been hard not to focus on money these past few months. If you're like me, you're wondering, how will this pandemic affect my pocketbook. You're wondering whether the economy has been handled the right way, or if there really is a "right" way, and listening to the commentators say it will be one of the most important factors in the election.

Despite the now familiar climate of economic worry, we're at that season of the year when most of churches ask their boards to think of the larger picture, when we sit down to talk about stewardship, to think about what we could say in a letter to the church members in these challenging times, to contemplate what we can give, ourselves, what we might be able to do without, to wonder, "What are the limits of possibilities?"

Jesus gave an unexpected answer to the Pharisees. Pay the taxes, he said, with the money designed by Caesar. Give God what is God's. Pay your taxes and your pledge. Amen.

That's how many a stewardship sermon might end! Keep being faithful to God and do what you have to do in the rest of the world. But that's too simple. Caesar, the emperor, occupied Jerusalem. The Romans invaded and held a people under house arrest. You could live your life as long as you capitulated to the authority of the Romans and their puppets. I found myself wondering this week, who is Caesar to us, really?

Have you ever listened to that humorous radio quiz show, "Wait, Wait, Don't

Tell me?” A panelist wondered, “What will we say to our children when there are no Christmas presents, because we lost our jobs during the pandemic?”

(My first thought: I’m glad my kids are older!) but there’s a truth in that question that connects directly to the Gospel. The Christmas they are talking about has nothing to do with the miracle of God’s presence among us as a human being. No, that Christmas has everything to do with shopping, with our consumer culture, with the notion that we all need more things than anyone can use – and that is what enslaves us as surely as Caesar’s army occupied Jerusalem. Jesus asked them, “Whose head is this, and whose title?”

They answered, “The emperors.” Then, Jesus said to them, “Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s”

I wonder, whose are we? Are we the people of God, set free in Jesus Christ, or are we the people of the coin, enslaved to our culture? Whose are we??

Some people enter the voting booth undecided. Some people arrive at church with no clear idea of where their deepest commitments lie. It’s easy for us to do that, because we don’t have a lot at stake, in the world’s terms, when we come to church. But that was not true in the first century, not true where the Roman Emperor reigned supreme and his governors and soldiers demanded the use of his coins in the marketplace.

Today we don’t have to fear that somewhere out in the parking lot a government spy is writing down our license plate numbers to report us for practicing our faith. We don’t have to worry about losing our jobs or our place in the community because we are following some strange new way, a new revolutionary God. In the public arena, our faith is low stakes.

But it was high stakes for the Pharisees asking Jesus their trick questions, and

it would be hard for many early generations of Christians, as faith in Jesus Christ spread beyond Galilee and Jerusalem and into the Roman world. The Thessalonians risked just such things because Christianity violated the civil religion of the Roman Empire. You could not worship one God. You were expected to worship the appropriate god, instead. To choose otherwise could be seen as an act of political rebellion.

You would not stand and flip a coin with Caesar's head to decide whether to be a Christian in the first century Corinth or Rome. You had to want it so much you couldn't help yourself. You had to give yourself to God, the self that was God's in the first place. You had to choose love over fear, an awareness of God's love for you, and a love you expressed in return to God and to your community in Christ.

When I think of Jesus standing there with the pharisees and the Herodians, I remember that Jesus was one of us, a person, using his tools to draw a conclusion. He recalled recent history, considered current events, and drew on his faith and answered the question with a question before driving his point home. I remind myself that his pocket did not hold even one coin.

You and I, each one of us, we have a choice about whose people to be. In a time of hardship and worry we can gather in our faith community, looking at things from another point of view. We can hear the bad news and give into it, or we can remember that we are God's people and seek the hope that is ours in Jesus Christ, in every time and place. Heads or tails, which will it be? May we always remember whose we are, to whom we belong, no coin-toss required.

Amen!