

20th Sunday of Pentecost Year A

Matthew 22.15-22

<sup>15</sup> Then the Pharisees went and plotted to entrap Jesus in what he said. <sup>16</sup> So they sent their disciples to him, along with the Herodians, saying, “Teacher, we know that you are sincere, and teach the way of God in accordance with truth, and show deference to no one; for you do not regard people with partiality. <sup>17</sup> Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?” <sup>18</sup> But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, “Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites? <sup>19</sup> Show me the coin used for the tax.” And they brought him a denarius. <sup>20</sup> Then he said to them, “Whose head is this, and whose title?” <sup>21</sup> They answered, “The emperor’s.” Then he said to them, “Give therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s.” <sup>22</sup> When they heard this, they were amazed; and they left him and went away.

10/18/20

What Belongs to God?

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The nation is turmoil. The government is being threatened by a man who claims to be a religious leader. He teaches and preaches against the religious leaders of the day as being unfaithful to their faith traditions. He speaks regularly of a new world order; a world where the lowly, the downtrodden of society are the new pillars of the faith community and the current leaders are set aside. Such men are dangerous to all those who wish to protect what they value, so a plan is put in place to entrap him for crimes against the state. The religious leaders are confident that he will speak out against loyalty to the state. So they send their agents along with the municipal and regional leaders to pretend they have real questions about his vision for the nation.

They begin their plan to trap the self proclaimed evangelist with flattery of his teaching and concern for all citizens. They say, “O Learned One, we know that

you are sincere, and teach the way of God in accordance with truth, and show deference to no one; for you do not regard people with discrimination. Please help us to understand an important question for the people of this land. Should we continue to support this corrupt and evil government with our taxes, or is it right to withhold our taxes until they hear our concerns?”

Sound familiar? Did you read a news story similar to this one in the paper, or hear it on the evening news recently? It does sound like the elements of a current debate between our nation’s leaders and some of those who challenge their decisions and visions for our nation. But of course, I am referring to Matthew’s telling of Jesus’ encounter with the Pharisees and those Jews who worked for the Roman rulers in the Palestine are. They are sure they have come up with a plan guaranteed to trap Jesus. They expect Jesus will either tell the visitors that they should not pay Caesar taxes, and they can have him arrested for treason, or he will tell them to pay the tax, and he will then incur the wrath of many of those who follow him expecting Jesus to lead the people in throwing off the foreign government that so heavily taxes and burdens the people of ancient Israel. A win, win scenario for the Pharisees and Herodians. But, Jesus sees thru their plot and gives them an answer that is not an answer, or is it?

“Give therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that belong to God.” A clever answer that satisfies no one, but doesn’t put Jesus in danger from either the government, or those who have chosen to follow him. Kind of sounds like some of our local, state and national candidates for political office. An answer that doesn’t answer the question. Or does it not? Is it possible that Jesus has answered their question, but in such a way that they don’t get how radical his answer is? I think that is exactly what Jesus does.

Obviously, the coin that has been minted by Caesar’s government bears his face. But does it belong to him? The Roman army marched into the region a

couple of centuries ago and conquered the local people, declaring this land to belong to the Emperor and his descendants. Sounds a lot like what was done in this land some two hundred years ago, **or even today**. Caesar's government exports all that has real value from the region to fatten the treasury in Rome, using the precious metals of the land to print the coin in debate this day. Then he demands taxes from the local people for the support of the very armies that oppress them. They have no voice in the taxation, and those who resist are executed for crimes against the state. So, does the coin belong to Caesar, or not? It is clearly debatable, and in many lands, this very situation has led to revolt, including our own. I would argue that the coin does not belong to Caesar at all, and any person, much less a religious leader, would be justified in not paying the tax.

But what of Jesus' second statement? "Give to God the things that belong to God." What belongs to God? That is likely the critical part of this exchange. What does belong to God? It is an important question every day of our lives, and it doesn't just apply to paying taxes.

A simple answer would be that everything belongs to God. After all, it is God that has created everything under the sun, so God can make a claim on it all, but I think a more critical point is that **WE** belong to God. Which raises another important question, what does it mean for us to belong to God? Jesus has told the Pharisees, "**give to God the things that belong to God.**" He could have more directly have said, "It doesn't matter whether you pay Caesar taxes or not. What matters is that you understand that **you** belong to God, and you must give yourselves to God, and God's purpose in this world, whether you pay taxes or not."

This time of the year we would normally gather for our congregational meeting, and we would consider several issues in the life of the church. We would make our financial commitments to the Church. We would be asked to make commitments of our time and talents as well. All are critical if this

Church is going to realize its dreams in the coming year, and if this church is going to be faithful to God's call for it in this community. We would also elect three elders to serve for the next three years. They would be elected to lead this congregation, chair the committees of the church, and most importantly, serve the Lord that all of us belong too. Each of these activities is vital in the life of any church. But they may have a special significance in the life of this church that you don't realize.

Over the last year, I have felt concern growing in this congregation about its future. I also know many of you are concerned that if this congregation doesn't adopt new behaviors and new plans for its future, it may not have a future for very long. While it is true, and natural, that some congregations die so that new ones can be planted to meet God's plans for a community, we pray that this church can grow and adapt, and by so doing, meet the needs of your new neighbors, while protecting and preserving the church that your parents and grandparents created. I believe that this church can continue to be healthy and important to this neighborhood, but the death of members make the concern even greater.

All of this is said to underscore the importance of what we will be doing in the coming days. I know that many of you have worked long and hard for this church. Some of you have a history of service that spans several decades. But until we attract new members from the new residents of this community to come and be a part of our vision, we need you to continue to be committed to the work of this church.

We need people to chair committees. We need people to work on committees doing small, but important tasks. We need people to teach, to visit our shut-ins, to call visitors, to mail cards to the sick, to lead the youth, to sing, to print bulletins. We need **everyone to pray** for the future of the church. The Corona virus has hit us and the community hard. It is hard to Reach Out to a community in refuge.

We have another special concern. We need the members of this Church to consider if it is time for this Church to plan its own death.

Yes, I said Death. It may be time for that decision. It is frightening to consider. No one wants it to happen, but it may be time. But even as we contemplate that ending, we must remember the words of Paul as he wrote, “Whether we live or whether we die, nothing can separate us from the love of God.” God will be with us to death and beyond.

We should consider all the ways this church can carry the message of God’s love forward so the legacy of this church will be preserved. Maybe the future of this church is to be a site for ministering to the ‘**least of these**’. This church could offer a site for many ministries that could offer comfort and relief to those struggling with life.

A food bank. A job training center. Continuing the pre-school program. A seniors rec center. A center to offer assistance to the schools in our community. A site for birthing classes for the young mothers around us. A Bible study to remind this community why this building, and these people, are dedicated to the One who ‘**Owens**’ us all. The list can go on and on.

Today’s text reminds us WE must always remember that WE are called to render unto God what belongs to God. Rendering can take many forms. All the above programs are forms of rendering to God. **What belongs to God is You and this Church.** We should carefully consider all the ways we could ‘render unto God.’ We should pray for all the ways that we may Trust in God’s provision and love for all of our concerns.

Let us be in prayer for our coming days and remember, God will not abandon us and we continue to belong to God until **the End** and beyond . Amen.