

The 20th Sunday after Pentecost
October 22, 2017
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Trinity Episcopal Church, Bend

Exodus 33:12-23
Psalm 99
1 Thessalonians 1:1-10
Matthew 22:15-22

*Render therefore unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's;
and unto God the things that are God's.*

Those are the same words we just heard in this morning's gospel, of course. But in this case, the familiar language of the old King James translation appeals. The problem with the old, familiar language, however, is that it may reinforce old, familiar ideas that aren't true.

We grew up, many of us, imagining we know the point of Jesus' answer, that he's referring us to two distinct realms, Caesar's and God's, and telling us that we should render to each what they ask for in their respective realms.

And more to the point, in this country, we grew up believing these words to be the moral force behind our hallowed separation between church and state. The words sound like Jesus telling us something we already know: we have a civic responsibility and a religious responsibility; a duty to the state and a duty to God.

But that isn't even *close* to what Jesus is talking about here.

In the first place, our concept of a separation of civic and religious life is a modern innovation. And Jesus isn't concerned with lessons in political science in any event.

He isn't even talking about taxes or taxation in a general way. He's embroiled in conflict and responding to a very specific question about a particular tax. We're given a hint this morning:

The Pharisees went and plotted to entrap Jesus ...

We're told that they were working with the Herodians – an odd mix. Pharisees worked hard to keep their distance from all things pagan (and defiling). Herodians, as the name suggests, were willing to work Herod, to “go along to get along.”

But that's just the tip of the iceberg. What's not obvious is just how volatile the mix really is – a perfect storm of people and place and time and an issue. They're stirring an already boiling pot.

This all takes place in a very public space at a tension-filled time. They're in the Temple. And it's Passover, Independence Day for Jews. The crowds are gathering, their patriotic juices flowing. They resent both Rome and Roman taxes, and they frequently rioted to make the point. And there'd have been extra soldiers on hand, as well, to keep a lid on things. And they didn't much care for the crowds either, whose rioting they had to control.

Into this volatile mix the Pharisees and Herodians ask about taxes. But it's not about taxes in general; it's about a very particular tax, an annual tribute tax to Rome. The people paid other taxes – a temple tax, land taxes, customs and trade taxes, to name a few. This tribute tax was specific, a yearly tax imposed on first-century Jews to pay to support of their own oppression.

It's a perfect trap. The most volatile time and place. They've praised Jesus for his sincerity. He'll have to answer, and there are no safe answers. If Jesus says no, he'll be arrested for treason; soldiers will be quick to act against any hint of sedition. If he says yes, he'll be discredited; the people will be quick to *re-act* against any hint of a leader who collaborates with the enemy.

People sometimes point out the genius of Jesus' debates is shown by his ability to outwit the wits of his time. This is a case in point, because part of the genius of what Jesus does and says is that how he traps the trappers in their own trap. They produce the coin used to pay the tax, a coin stamped with the image of Caesar, inscribed with words proclaiming his divinity. The coin breaks the first two of THE 10 Commandments against false gods and graven images. The Pharisees stand there, holding the evidence of their own complicity.

So, when Jesus says to render to Caesar what's Caesar's and to God what is God's, he's turned the table on them. He saying, "Go ahead. Give the cursed thing (in your own hand) back."

And part of the genius is that Jesus shows them up without showing much of anything else, to say so very much while saying so very little.

To Roman ears, it probably sounded like Jesus is simply saying it's okay to pay taxes. Soldiers who pledged allegiance to Caesar as Lord, as God, might only have heard "Render unto Caesar" as essentially the same as rendering unto God. They'd be okay, so long as rendering is going on.

And if Jesus had stopped there, maybe that's all anyone could have made of his response. But, of course, Jesus adds a bit more to the mix: ... *and [render] unto God the things that are God's.*

Oh, to Jewish eyes and ears, those words make an inescapable point. After all, what belongs to God? Or to put it another way what doesn't belong to God. Nothing. There is nothing in all creation that is not God's.

Consider the words we still say most every week (at least at our early service at Trinity):

All things come of thee, O Lord;
And of thine own have we given thee.

The words come straight out of the Bible, by the way, out of the mouth of King David (1 Chron. 29:14).

To Jewish ears, any "Caesar" here on earth is but a pretender to any throne.

The first four words of this morning's Psalm make the point crisply and clearly:

The Lord is King ...

Not Caesar or Emperor. Not any King or Queen. Not any President. God alone upon the throne.

You see, today's gospel doesn't encourage our separation of state and religion. On the contrary, it calls on us not to pledge allegiance to any pretender, but to give all that we have and all that we are to God. In other words, it's about stewardship. We cannot say that "this part of who I am belongs to God, so I will render it to God." Everything we are, everything we have, belongs to God.

We're in the midst of a stewardship season right now here at Trinity. Let me take a moment to anticipate a criticism I sometimes hear. I've heard a complaint that we only focus on money. I understand the concern and I acknowledge the point ... to a point. There are a lot of ways to talk about stewardship beyond our financial giving. But those other ways don't negate the need for us to talk about money, at least from time to time.

And this is that time in the life-cycle of our church. And even if our question is not precisely the one posed to Jesus, the gospel given to us this morning begs a question about what our relationship to money says about our relationship to God. And is our assumption that civic life is separate from religious life an attempt to limit God's call on all that we are?

Let me leave you with a story about yet another time and place. It's a story about the ancient Gauls, a warlike people who once lived in what is now France. Some say they were Celts who made their way down south to vex the Romans. The Roman Empire conquered them at one time. But they were warriors; they never took to being conquered. In time, Christian missionaries ventured north and, over time, many Gauls became Christians. As the story goes, when a converted warrior was baptized in a river or a stream, the warrior would hold one arm up in the air as the missionary administered the baptism. That way, when the next battle or skirmish broke out, the warlike Gaul could proclaim, "This arm is not baptized!" and grab a club or a sword or an ax, and ride off to destroy their enemies in a most un-Christian manner.

Maybe it's true. Maybe not. It's a compelling image either way ... the picture of someone laying claim to their God-given identity, while at the same time trying to keep one part of their body apart, holding one aspect of their identity free from God's claim on their whole selves.

All things come of thee, O Lord;
And of thine own have we given thee ...

And of thine own *will* we give thee ...

For if we have anything at all to give, it is God's own we give ... if only because all that we have and all that we are comes from the God who has made us and sustains us.