

21st Sunday after Pentecost
October 22, 2023
Lectionary 29 (A)
Text: Matthew 22:15-22

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In our gospel story for today, the Jerusalem authorities tried to lay a trap for Jesus. They posed a trick question. “Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not? They thought that any way Jesus tried to answer it would cause him trouble. If Jesus said yes, it is lawful, the people who supported him would turn away in droves. They hated Rome and hated the Roman troops occupying their land. They hated the burdensome Roman tax and, as religious people, they especially hated paying the tax with coins that displayed a blasphemous image of Caesar. It was like they were being forced to finance their own oppression in a manner that offended their own religious sensibilities! So, if Jesus answered “yes,” it would destroy his public standing. But if Jesus said no, don’t pay the tax. God is your king, not Caesar. Then Rome would see Jesus as a threat to their rule and they would execute Jesus as an enemy of the state. And either way, yes or no, the Jerusalem authorities thought their problems with Jesus were over.

But to their shock and dismay, Jesus escaped their trap and made them look bad in the process. But for us two millennia later, it may not be completely clear what Jesus meant. So this morning I’d like to explore with you what it means for us, “Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor, and give to God the things that are God’s.” It’s a wonderfully creative and challenging way of picturing what it means to be people of faith, what it means to believe in God. But there are two potential detours we should make sure we avoid.

First, we should be clear that Jesus was not suggesting that we can compartmentalize life, as if there were some things that belong to Caesar and other things that belong to God. There are not two separate spheres of activity in life. We don’t move back and forth between, for example, a secular sphere of life and a religious sphere of life; or worse, a public arena, that includes being a citizen, and a private arena, that includes being a person of faith. Jesus wasn’t anticipating our modern ideas about the separation of church and state. He was speaking instead from the wisdom of Scripture: “The earth is the Lord’s, and all that is in it.” (Psalm 24:1) Jesus wants us to see that everything that could ever belong to Caesar or be claimed by Caesar first belongs to God. In fact, Caesar himself belongs to God—just as we ourselves, the whole of us, belong to God. Heart, mind, body, spirit—it’s all belongs to God.

And secondly, I’m certain Jesus doesn’t want to suggest that our relationship with God is a kind of transaction—as if God will look on us with favor and bless us, but only once we’ve paid what we owe to God; or worse, just like the government, God will leave us alone to do whatever we want as long as we’ve paid what we owe. Life with God is all about grace and gift, not earning or deserving.

So then, avoiding those two detours, I wonder how this image of giving to God the things that are God’s is speaking to you. Here’s what I’ve been intrigued by this week as I’ve been thinking about this text. The coin with the emperor’s image on it is what belongs to the emperor—so giving the emperor what is the emperor’s seems pretty straightforward. Give him the coin and you’re done. But as human beings, it’s we ourselves who are created in God’s image, so it’s our whole self—everything!—that belongs to God. How do we go about giving to God the things

that are God's? What does God want from us? Maybe we could think of three different ways that we return to God what belongs to God—as individuals, as people who are part of a community, and as creatures who inhabit God's earth.

As individuals, what God wants from each of us is a life that shows compassion and forgiveness, generosity and humility—the basic things that are at the heart of everything Jesus taught and did. Jesus invites us to recognize the little decisions we make every day with time and money and abilities—we're really using God's time, and spending God's money, and making use of God's abilities, since all we are and all we have belong to God. And God wants all those decisions to be about love. Loving our neighbor as our self is the obedience we give to God. But this way of living is also our truest joy and most genuine life. When we give to God a life that is all about love, what we receive is a life that is meaningful and rewarding for us.

But we are more than just individuals, we're also part of a community, and what God wants from all of us together is a commitment to each other, to contribute to a shared life that is inclusive and fair and just. And I mean this about more than only our life together as a congregation. In our neighborhood, in our city, our state, our country, we seek to build up and not tear down. For example, we obey the law because we trust that God has an interest in stable, civil society, which will be a benefit both to us and our neighbor. When we pay taxes, it's because as followers of Jesus who love God and our neighbor, we know that God is concerned for those who are most vulnerable, so we want to provide a safety net to protect them. When an election comes around, we vote, because participating in our democracy is one of the ways we seek to contribute to a society that is fair and just for all people. And when we, all of us together, give to God a life like this, as part of each community we belong to, we hope to experience one of the blessings from God that Luther names in the Small Catechism—good government, a well-ordered life together.

We are also inhabitants of God's great creation, and what God wants from us as we live on this beautiful earth is a way of living that is never all about self, but instead looks beyond us, beyond our span of life, to care for God's creation so that it can be a blessing for generations to come. So as a consumer, as a worker, as a voter, we're never satisfied with asking only if some action or decision is good for us. We also try, at least, to be attentive to our lifestyle, our dinner menu, our investment decisions, our vacation plans—what will they mean for neighbors who live in marginal situations? What will they mean for neighbors who haven't even been born yet? Out of love for them, we seek a lifestyle that is sustainable and equitable. And when we give to God a life like this, we hope we will receive, and our children will receive, a habitable and peaceful planet.

Dear children of God, I hope you see that none of these ways of returning to God what belongs to God are burdensome or exploitative—like the emperor's tax was. Instead, they are the key to a life of joy and beauty and peace and contentment. And I pray you will always experience such joy. And beauty. And peace. And contentment. Amen.