

Twentieth Sunday After Pentecost
Matthew 22:15-22

Giving Back to God*

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The Church of the Transfiguration
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There's an exercise that some professors of preaching like to use in their seminary classes. Basically the students arrive at class, and they are surprised with an assignment, out of the blue, to preach on a random biblical passage with at most ten to fifteen minutes of preparation.

The purpose of this assignment is not to haze the students or to be mean to them. The purpose is to give them some experience with preaching in last-minute situations. For example, let's say the assigned preacher for the day doesn't show up or can't make it to church due to an emergency. Then it's important that you, as a priest, are able to know what to do in such a situation.

I don't think that I ever appreciated this exercise as much as I do this morning. I am obviously not Fr. van Dooren, who is listed in your bulletin as being the preacher for today. At around 10:30 last night, I learned that I might need to cover the sermon this morning. And I received confirmation of this around 5:30 this morning.

It turns out that Fr. van Dooren is in the hospital following a nasty spider bite. He is being treated with IV antibiotics, and so the doctor's haven't yet cleared him to leave. The good news is that he is fine, and he sends his love and greetings to all of you. I'm sure that if he could deliver the sermon by videoconference, he would. But you will have settle for the associate rector instead this morning. And I am sure that he and Gary would appreciate your prayers for healing. We will have a get-well card after mass in the back of the church and at coffee hour that you can sign. Anyway, onwards and upwards!

In today's gospel passage from Matthew, we hear about the religious leaders of Jesus' day – the Pharisees and the Herodians – trying to entrap Jesus and trying to get him into trouble. They ask him a difficult question about paying the tribute tax to the Roman government. Now, the tribute tax was a greatly despised tax. You may dislike paying taxes on April 15th, but this tax was significantly worse. It was basically a tax imposed by an unwanted, oppressive government on the people so that the government could continue its unwanted, oppressive rule over them. The people were basically paying for their own oppression!

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Normally the Pharisees and Herodians were enemies. The Pharisees were opposed to Roman rule, and the Herodians were supporters of that rule. But they were united in their dislike of Jesus and their desire to see him get into trouble. So they sent their disciples to him, asking a tricky question, “Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor or not?”

Now this was a no-win situation for Jesus. If he said yes, then he would have lost the support of the Israelite people, who hated the oppressive Roman government. But if he said no, then the Herodians would have reported him to the Roman government, and he would have gotten into trouble with the state authorities. So it was a no-win situation.

But Jesus is too clever to fall into this trap. Instead, he flips the question around and asks his inquisitors to show him the coin – the denarius – that was used to pay the tribute tax. “Whose head is this, and whose title?” he asked. They replied, “The emperor’s.” Jesus responded, “Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s.” This was what we call nowadays a mike drop moment. The Pharisees and Herodians were amazed, and they didn’t know how to respond. So they went away.

Now there’s actually a lot going on in Jesus’ response. Let’s unpack it a bit. First of all, Jesus answers the question in such a way that silences his critics. The Pharisees aren’t able to accuse Jesus of supporting the hated Roman government and turn the people against him. This is because Jesus teaches the people simply to return to the emperor a coin that is marked with his image (and thus is something that already belongs to the emperor). On the other hand, Herodians aren’t able to accuse him of opposing the Roman government and report him to the authorities. This is because Jesus tells the people to give to the emperor what is rightfully his.

But more importantly, Jesus is actually saying something quite subversive. In addition to telling the people to give to the emperor what is his, he also tells them to give God what is God’s.

Many of us think that today’s gospel passage is about the principles of separation of church and state. In other words, we hear Jesus as saying that there is a realm that belongs to the secular government (that is, the realm of the emperor or Caesar) *and* there is a realm that belongs to religion (that is, realm of God). And the two shall never meet. But this kind of thinking was actually quite foreign in the context of Jesus’ time. The government was completely intertwined with religion, and religion was completely intertwined with the government. There was no such thing as “church and state.”

So what is Jesus really saying? By telling the people to give “to God the things that are God’s,” Jesus is actually teaching us that, ultimately, we must give *everything* back to God. In the Book of Genesis, God is the creator of the heavens and the earth. In fact, God is the creator of everything in the universe, including all of us. So if we are to give to God the things that are God’s, we are ultimately called to give *everything* back to God.

Yes, the coin is imprinted with the image of the emperor, and so it technically belongs to the emperor. However, as we learn from the Book of Genesis, all of us are imprinted with the image and likeness of God through the act of creation. We all carry the imprint of God on our souls, like the image on the coin. And so we are ultimately called to give ourselves – and everything that we have – back to God. And so, Jesus' saying is actually quite subversive with respect to the power of the emperor and Roman rule!

Today's gospel reading is quite fitting as we launch our 2018 stewardship campaign. This past week, you should have received by email an electronic copy of our pledge card. And if you didn't receive the email, there are hard copies in the back of the church. As you can see, there is a poster in the back of the church with a thermometer image, showing the progress of the campaign. Happily, we are already off to a great start, thanks to the pledges from the vestry and staff. But the campaign cannot succeed without your participation and help.

Today's gospel reminds us that we are to give to God the things that are God's. And what that means – in light of the Book of Genesis and the story of creation – is that making a pledge to our parish should not be an afterthought. Nor should it be viewed as some kind of tribute tax.

Rather, our pledges should be the starting point for all of our charitable giving in the coming year. As Jesus teaches us today, each and every one of us is called to give back just a small part of what ultimately belongs to God – which is everything that we have, and everything who we are.

As Father van Dooren mentioned in his email and his recent blog post on our website, our goal is to reach a 100% participation rate in our stewardship campaign this year. It doesn't matter how little or how much someone is able to give – whether \$1 or \$10,000. What matters is the discipline of pledging and the acknowledgement that each of us is giving back to God the things that belong to God.

Finally, along those lines, we are starting something new liturgically today. We are asking you, the congregation, to stand at the beginning of the offertory, when the gifts of bread and wine are brought by parishioners to the deacon and subdeacon at the altar. This is a beautiful and powerful way to acknowledge the teaching of today's gospel with our bodies – that our gifts and offerings are sacred because they ultimately come from God. You are then invited to sit for the rest of the anthem when the parishioners have handed off the elements and turn to return to their seats.

“Give to God the things that are God's.” These words remain as true today as they did two thousand years ago. Together we acknowledge that God is the source of all that we have and all that we are. And together we will build up the Kingdom of God for all who enter the doors of this sacred place.