

“What Is God’s”

Sermon Preached by Rev. Young-Mee Park
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Then the Pharisees went and plotted to entrap him in what he said. 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. Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?" But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, "Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites? Show me the coin used for the tax." And they brought him a denarius. Then he said to them, "Whose head is this, and whose title?" They answered, "The emperor's." Then he said to them, "Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's." When they heard this, they were amazed; and they left him and went away. (Matthew 22:15-22)

I don't know exactly how old I was. I really liked the story we read today. Following my mother's example, I started to read the Bible as soon as I became somewhat proficient in reading. But, I have to confess. It was not easy. Imagine a 6 or 7 year old reading the King James Bible starting from the first page. That is what I was doing. The children's Bible was not available to me. Many of the chapters were just too difficult or too boring. But, I really liked the story we read in our gospel lesson today. It seemed so real, so dramatic, and so clever to me! Jesus was my hero! Today, I am delighted to revisit one of the favorite stories of my childhood.

It was in Jerusalem, during the closing days Jesus' life. The scene begins with disciples of Pharisees, along with a few Herodians, coming to Jesus to ask a question. Now, this is already a very interesting beginning! I did not know this when I was a child, but Pharisees and Herodians, they did not mix. No. The Pharisees were nationalists. They despised Rome. The Herodians were, as their name indicates, supporters of the Herod dynasty endorsed by Rome. They were realists or collaborators. In today's story, we see these two opposing sects united by a common enemy, the trouble-maker Jesus! Isn't this interesting?

Anyway, a coalition thus formed, they came to see Jesus and asked a question: *"Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?"* They are not stupid, these Pharisees and Herodians, are they? Yes or no, Jesus will surely displease someone in his answer. Either way Jesus answers, he will get into trouble. He is either a Roman sympathizer or a seditionist. I can see triumphant smiles spreading on their faces. *"Gotchya,"* they might have thought.

However, Jesus knew that they were up to no good. Jesus was the master of the situation. *"Do you have a coin? Let me see it,"* he said in lieu of an answer. At this point, the situation is definitely being reversed. But the Pharisees do not know this. *"Here,"* they

handed him a silver piece. And of course, the coin had an engraving on it. *“This engraving— whom does it look like? And whose name is on it?”* They said, *“The emperor.”*

Do you know what it meant back then for a Pharisee to carry a coin that had Caesar’s head engraved on it? A sacrilege, blasphemy, idolatry, violation of the first and second commandments! By handing Jesus a coin bearing Caesar’s image and inscription, they were disclosing how hypocritical and malicious they were. If they truly believed what they taught, if they truly walked the talk, they could not and should not have carried a coin with Caesar’s engraving on it in their pocket. But they did!

You see? Jesus did not have to continue. Even if the story ended here, Jesus would have won. At this point, Jesus could have just walked away, victorious. But he did not. He had more. *“Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s,”* he said.

Then and now, the tax is still due, the emperor is still well and alive, and Christians still struggle with the place of emperor in relation to their faith. However, Jesus’ admonition does not seem to solve any of these struggles. What are the things that belong to the emperor, and what are the things that are God’s? Where do you draw the line? Jesus does not seem to give us clear instruction. Then, is this simply a call for separation of church and state, or religious and civic lives, wherever and in whatever shape the dividing line may be drawn?

Well, let me ask you a question here. What do you think are the things that belong to God? What do you think you owe to God? Everything! God is the maker of all life; God is the sustainer of all living things! God is the giver of all that make life possible and good! Each breath we take is a gift from God. Each new day put before us is a gift from God. Each new life is a gift from God. The baby baptized today is, of course, the son of Stacey and Scott. But they did not create life. God did. They co-authored or cooperated with God in bringing Alex’s precious little life into this world. That is what we proclaimed today in his baptism. Alex is God’s. Each new born child is God’s.

No, my friends. At issue in our gospel lesson today is neither taxation nor our relationship with political authorities. And neither is this a story to show how clever Jesus is, as I thought in my childhood. It is about our existential relationship with God. It is about God’s Kingdom that embraces all of life. We are to render to God wholly and without condition our entire lives, our entire beings.

“Praise God from whom all blessings flow,” we sing every Sunday. What if we lived out this faith about which we sing in our daily lives? What, then, will our daily schedule look like? What, then, will our bank statements look like? What, then, will our relationships look like? What will our daily lives look like, if we truly believed that it is in God that we live and move and have our being? Some two thousand years later, the Caesars and Pharaohs are still alive and well in our world, claiming our devotion and allegiance. And Jesus tells us that this is a question everyone must ask and about which we must decide: What belongs to whom? Who is the lord in our lives?

May God grant us grace that we may render to God what is God’s! May we praise God, in who we live, and move, and have our being, and from whom all blessings flow! May we praise our God, with all that we have, and with all that we are! Let the congregation say, Amen!