

**20 Pentecost  
October 18, 2020**

**In the name of the God of all Creation,  
The God alive in each of us as God was alive in Jesus,  
And the power of God known in the Spirit.  
Amen.**

On a first reading, this passage from Matthew's Gospel we just heard, seems to be about taxation. The Pharisees and the Herodians, eager to entrap Jesus and expedite his arrest, approach him with a question: "Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?"

Of course, this is a trick question. The Pharisees of Jesus's day saw the currency used to pay the tax as ritually unclean. It had the image of Caesar imprinted on the coin, and the Emperor was considered a deity, therefore the coin was a form of an idol in opposition to the Second of the Ten Commandments ... "You shall not make for yourself an idol ...".

On the other hand, the Herodians were loyalists to the occupying Roman government and viewed the refusal to pay the tax as subversion of the Roman authority.

Jesus understood that answering either way was a lose/lose ... either/or proposition. He also knew that the question proceeded not from curiosity, but from pure malice. Though his questioners approach him with flattery saying, "Teacher, we know that you are sincere, and teach the way of God in accordance with truth," Jesus knew that their intentions were actually sinister.

So Jesus took the Roman coin ... this coin that honors the Roman emperor as a deity ... and offers the Pharisees and Herodians an ambiguous, "both/and" answer: "Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's."

How typical of Jesus ... not only to respond to a challenge with an even greater challenge, but to insist that the relationship between faith and politics is too complex to be reduced to mere platitudes.

Let's take a look at what Jesus does not say. He does not say that there are two distinct realms ... the religious and the secular ... and that they require our equal fidelity. What Jesus does say is far more subtle and complicated ... the coin is already the emperor's ... there's his face stamped right on it ... so give it to him. But then consider the much harder question ... what belongs to God? What kind of tribute do we owe to God?

On the face of it, this passage is about taxes and a particular coin. However, at a deeper level it is about currency ... the world's currency, and God's currency. The world's currency isn't just about money. It is about status ... and credentials ... and power ... and privilege. God's currency is about compassion ... and justice ... and mercy ... and respect ... and wholeness of life.

We are all beloved children of God, made in God's image. No ... we don't have a coin with our God's image on it, because every cell of our bodies is imprinted with God's image. From the opening chapters of Genesis, we know that as human beings created by God, we bear God's image. God's likeness is stamped into us and upon us. God's signature is written across our very beings. Just listen to the words of the Eucharistic Prayer that we are using during our fall season on Pentecost.

*At your command all things came to be: the vast expanse of interstellar space, galaxies, suns, the planets in their courses, and this fragile earth, our island home. From the primal elements you brought forth the human race, and blessed us with memory, reason and skill.*

Which means ... if we keep the analogy going ... that we are God's currency. Our whole and entire selves. Any fantasy we might harbor of dividing up the secular and the sacred is simply that ... a fantasy. We cannot separate Caesar's realm from God's realm when everything ... everything in all creation ... is stamped as God's currency.

We are just seventeen days away from a presidential election that feels existential. Regardless of where one stands politically, it feels like everything we care about is on the ballot. As a nation, we are divided, anguished, bruised, and broken. We all know folks who have lost their ability to extend grace or generosity to people whose views differ from theirs. I know ... at times I feel like that. Some of us have become so fed-up, exhausted, and cynical that we feel numb. The overwhelming anxiety and fear is like a wet blanket on everything we do.

However, I am fully aware that all of us have friends, family members, and others that we encounter who hold radically different political views than we do ... and to whom we owe every bit of love, respect, and faithfulness we can muster. So, if we are to take seriously what Jesus took seriously, what does it mean to *"Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's."*

What does it mean to give to God what belongs to God in these hard and divisive days? How do we bear forth God's image while our families and communities splinter over political and cultural differences that often seem unbridgeable? How do we live into the all-encompassing reign of God while a scorched-earth, ideology-driven, "the end justifies the means" divisiveness rules within American politics?

The "ends justifying the means" surrounds us when people will do anything to accomplish a particular goal. Sometimes it seems innocent ... telling a "fib" so we don't have to be accept an invitation to dinner. Or, when we bend the truth to avoid an embarrassing situation. But, more often it is outright lying ... and cheating ... and deceit ... and bullying ... until someone gets their way and achieves their objective. The "end" result is so important to them, that they will do just about anything to achieve it.

The thing is, when I read the Gospels, I don't see a Jesus who cares more about the "end" than the "means." If anything, he honors and exemplifies the "means." Jesus understood that the way we go about achieving our goals ... the language we use or abuse ... the stories we choose to voice or to silence ... the people we protect or those we oppress ... the truths we proclaim or deny ... these make all the difference in the world.

As people who take seriously what Jesus took seriously, we don't have the option of fudging on the love and mercy of God for some "greater" end result ... political or otherwise. We can't isolate our political choices and actions, as if they don't reflect who we are as image-bearers of our Creator. If we are image-bearers of God ... God's currency in this world ... then our spiritual lives and our political lives must correspond ... they must not contradict each another. Which is to say, what is technically "legal" isn't always compassionate. What is politically expedient isn't always just ... or merciful ... or compassion ... or life-giving. Our political leaders are not our gods. Our "rendering unto Caesar" must always take second place to what we render unto God.

So, when I look to Jesus to think about how to practice my faith in the political realm, I see no path forward that sidesteps humility, surrender, compassion, and sacrificial love. I see in Jesus no permission to secure my success at the expense of another person's suffering ... no evidence that telling anything other than the full truth is optional. I see no expression of the kingdom of God that favors the disrespectful over the brokenhearted ... that champions the autocrat over the oppressed ... that favors the wealthy over the impoverished. Jesus consistently taught that "the last will be first, and the first will be last." Taking seriously what Jesus took seriously means living in a world that has been turned upside down.

The media has spilled much ink over America's current political situation. Every argument and counterargument has been made ad nauseam, and as far as I can tell, no one really has the heart to listen to their opponents with genuine curiosity or compassion anymore. But maybe this is exactly the place where Jesus' teaching becomes the sharpest and most relevant. As an image-bearer of a loving, forgiving, and gracious God, maybe what we owe God in this hour is the very grace and generosity God extends to all of us.

Figuring out my taxes is the easy part. What is much harder is living out my political convictions with a Christlike humility, with a compassion that embraces my political counterpart as a brother or sister. But if I really belong to God ... if I really am fashioned in God's image ... then I need to practice my faith and my politics in ways that reflect who God is. It is not a question of backing down, or of being dishonest, or of watering down my beliefs. It's a question of remembering that the God whose image I bear is a God of endless compassion, mercy, and sacrificial love.

So yes, by all means, give the emperor what belongs to the Emperor. However, remember that our first loyalty is to a kingdom that will remain long after earthly empires rise and fall. "Caesar's" realm is limited and temporal ... God's reign is eternal and all-encompassing. Give to

God what is God's. In short, give God everything ... every cell of your body is imprinted with the image of God, and you are God's currency.

Amen.