

Conley Memorial Presbyterian Church, 20th Sunday After Pentecost, Oct. 22, 2017

What Belongs to God?

October 22, 2017

Matthew 22:15-22

I have a confession to make to you. My sermon today is not original, not at all. Very few sermons are. Pastors use many different sources when preparing sermons. In my case I have a guide book ⁽¹⁾ which suggests series of sermons on various topics and I thought that its comments on today's gospel lesson were very timely for several reasons, so much so that much of what I plan to say today is based upon that reference.

You really didn't think that we pastors come up with totally original ideas each week, did you? If you think that way, just try to write an original commentary every week, week in and week out. I'll bet that you can't do it.

A pastor friend of mine once said that nothing we preach is original and that we have to rely on the equity of other pastors and Biblical commentaries and she is quite correct. So following her advice, I am freely using my guide book as the basis of my message today. That said, repeat after me. "I love to pay taxes and I want to increase my tithe to the church."

Can you say that? Is it true? Likely not.

It is human nature to hold on to what we have. We work for what we have and want to control how it is used. We do control what we give to the church but taxes are another thing all together.

A major cause of the American Revolution was taxation without representation. People resented being taxed without a so-so, and even today people still resent taxes. We pay them but we grumble about it.

Think back to Biblical times. If you don't like taxes, what about the people of Jerusalem and Israel as a whole. They were living in an occupied Roman province and had no say with respect to taxation. They were allowed, at least until 70 AD when it was burned, to have their Temple but not much more. They were not really Roman citizens and were heavily taxed. Tax collectors were corrupt, pocketed much of what they collected, and were hated but there was little the people could do about it.

The Jewish religious leaders wanted to overthrow the Roman government but were too cowardly to try. However there were some Jews who were benefitting rather well from the Roman occupation. They were the Herodians, who did not get along with the Pharisees and scribes. The Herodians get their name from originally supporting King Herod but, like the Pharisees and scribes, they agreed that they needed to get rid of Jesus.

The Herodians and Pharisees were total opposites but, in this case, had the common goal to get rid of Jesus. Today it would be almost like conservative Republicans and liberal Democrats teaming up and being in total agreement.

So what did the Pharisees and Herodians do? They planted a question in the crowd about paying Roman taxes.

It was a loaded question. If Jesus said not to pay the taxes, the Romans would have reacted violently. If he said that the taxes should be paid, the religious zealots in the crowd would accuse him of going against the word of God and would stone him.

So Jesus, as was typical, answered the question with another question. He asked, "Does anyone have a Roman coin?" Of course they did but didn't like admitting it. The Pharisees taught that Roman money was appalling to Yahweh God. To produce a coin would show their hypocrisy but they nervously handed Jesus a coin.

Jesus looked the coin over and asked whose image was on the coin. The image of course was that of Caesar. Jesus then told the Pharisees and Herodians to pay to Caesar whatever belonged to him and to pay God whatever belonged to God.

Jesus was not talking about taxes, not at all. He was saying to give to God what belongs to God --- that of course is a lot more than any tax levy.

Even today preachers can't win when they talk about money. We walk on eggshells if we conduct a stewardship campaign.

Typically church attendance suffers if the church has a formal stewardship season. It feels like going for a root canal, not cheerful giving.

The problem is really not one of giving; it is one of remembering who, whatever we have, really owns it.

Jesus said to let Caesar have his small coins but to let the people of God decide whom they serve, the IRS or God.

Followers of God need to remember and to decide that whatever they have,

whoever they are, what they do and what they think, all really belong to God.

Our scripture reading really is about separation of church and state, which is fundamental to our form of government today.

Clearly Jesus had evaded his questioners by tossing the question back at them. He effectively told them that they themselves had to decide where the line is between Roman jurisdiction and God's jurisdiction.

The coin bore Caesars image and humans bear God's image. Everyone, no matter where they live and what their personal circumstances are, belongs to God. That does not change after worship and when you go to vote.

Walter Bruggemann, et al ⁽²⁾, commented that the scripture reading "... *is certainly not iconoclastic regarding governments. It gives space to political arrangements by the reminder that ... all of God's children bear the divine image and therefore belong to God ...*

"When the divine image is desired and persons are made by political circumstances to be less than [that] ... then the text carries a revolutionary word, a word that has to be spoken to both oppressed and oppressor."

Ask yourself, "What belongs to God?" when you consider your tithe or pledge for next year. The answer of course is "everything".

There is no need or expectation that you should give everything back to the church but you should prayerfully consider if what you are giving is enough to meet the needs of the church.

Amen.

1. Brian Erickson in A Preacher's Guide to Lectionary Sermon Series, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, KY, 2016
2. Walter Bruggemann, et al, Texts for Preaching, Year A, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, KY, 1995