

Matthew 22:15-22

I think it's very likely that many of us are relieved that this Sunday we do not have another parable from Matthew about evil tenants killing slaves in order to get rich, or a petulant king killing would-be wedding guests, setting the city on fire as punishment and throwing a man not properly dressed into the outer darkness to weep and gnash his teeth. It's true that Matthew is aiming to give vivid illustrations that the kingdom of God is a radical kingdom that has no respect for or allegiance to chief priests, elders or Pharisees. But, it's been difficult to listen to the violence and vitriol in these parables. We are so far removed from the anger and acrimony these early Christians felt against the religious authorities, the people who had the wealth and the power and thought they also held the keys to the kingdom.

So at first glance, the passage from the Gospel this morning may seem easier to understand. The Pharisees and Herodians try to trap Jesus by first flattering him and then asking him if a good Jew should pay taxes to the Roman emperor. I guess taxes were an inflammatory topic even then. Jesus asks them to show him the coin used for the tax and then he asks them whose head is on the coin and whose title. They answer that it is the emperors' and then Jesus gives an amazing answer. He says "Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor's and to God the things that are God's."

Now, if we are honest, our first reaction may be to note how clever and wise Jesus' reply is. If he had said don't pay taxes to the emperor he would have been in trouble with the authorities of the state. And if he had said, sure, go ahead and pay the taxes he would have been in trouble with devout Jews who were troubled about paying the tax. They were troubled because they were an occupied nation, forced to pay taxes to a foreign ruler who held absolute power over them. The coin used to pay taxes was the denarius. It was worth a day's wages and one side of the coin bore the image of the emperor and the words Tiberius Caesar, August Son of the Divine Augustus and on the other side it said "Pontifex Maximus" which means high priest in Latin. Faithful Jews were affronted by coins that were imprinted with words that went against everything they believed in. Their God was Yahweh, not Caesar and he was certainly not their idea of a high priest.

In his answer is Jesus sort of sidestepping a very difficult theological and ethical question? I don't think so. For many faithful Christians, Jesus' answer- Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor's and to God the things that are Gods- has raised more questions than answers. On one hand, many Christians throughout history have interpreted this statement as an early doctrine of separation of church and state. Giving to God the things that are God's means going to church, saying your prayers and obeying the Ten Commandments and the rules of the church. Giving to the emperor the things that are the emperors means that the state

requires different things from its citizens, paying your taxes, registering for the draft, obeying the rules of your country.

On the other hand many Christians, especially those from peace churches like Quakers, Mennonites and the Church of the Brethren understood Jesus' words to mean that being a Christian meant not paying taxes that went to fighting wars, not registering for the draft or fighting in war and protesting when you thought the rules or policies of your country were against the rules and commandments of your God.

I don't think Jesus was being clever or wise when he said "give to the emperor the things that belong to the emperor and give to God the things that are God's because it's pretty clear to me that everything we have we have because God gave it to us. The intelligence and ingenuity that enables us to earn our living comes from God. Our body's strength that gives us the ability to labor and work is a gift from God. If every beat of our heart and every breath we breathe is a gift from God, then we have nothing that is truly our own. Everything we have belongs to God.

When we understand that, then we are truly free. God takes first place in our hearts and in our lives and the emperor gets only –well only our taxes. We give back to God our labor, our love, our families, our talents, our time and our treasure. When we understand that everything belongs to God we live abundantly. When we give to God after we have given to everyone else we are living in scarcity. The choice is ours.

It's not an easy choice. But how could it be? We have to ask God to help us decide what to do with the money we have and to help us make things better for those who have almost nothing. They belong to God just as much as we do. In the United States today more and more of us are unemployed or underemployed. More and more of us are being evicted or facing foreclosure of our homes. More and more of us are going to food pantries and soup kitchens because there is just not enough money for food. More and more of us have to go to the emergency room when we are sick because we don't have health insurance.

There is a growing sense that something has gone badly wrong in our land of prosperity and opportunity. In our cities, protestors like Occupy Wall Street are saying that things cannot go on the way they are any longer. Now we may not all agree with what they are asking for. I don't think they even agree about what they are asking for. But I have to wonder how we would feel about their protests if they were using the language of giving to God what is God's. Should Christians try to order things so that everyone has a place to live, a job, enough to eat and medical help when they are sick?

We are blessed with the reason and skill to be intentional about what we give back to God. We are blessed by all the gifts God has given us. May the choices we make about our time and

talents and treasure come out of our sense of abundance, gifts freely given by grateful hearts, living breathing images of the one who has given us all we have.

Amen