

Twenty-Third Sunday after Pentecost
 October 19, 2008
 10.19 Means of Grace—Tithing

Matthew 22:15-22

Resources: *Claim the Name: Confirmation Teaching Plans for 6-15 Weeks*, 2006; *The New Oxford Annotated Bible: New Revised Standard Version with Apocrypha*, 3rd ed., 2001.

Don't you just love how Jesus turns the tables on the Pharisees & Herodians in this passage? "Render... to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, & to God the things that are God's." Such a clever defense! But he doesn't really mean it, does he? I mean all things do belong to God, right?

Such a surface reading of this encounter reduces it to a trickster story. It's entertaining & most of us are satisfied with that. But Jesus is no mere trickster & so to leave it there is to risk missing a much more profoundly revelatory teaching. The key to a deeper understanding of this passage hinges on a single word, a word we often ignore when we quote the half verse of 21b. Did you notice it? Do you remember what word lies in the ellipse above?

"... therefore...!"

"Render *therefore* to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, & to God the things that are God's." ^(RSV, emphasis added) Jesus makes a consequential statement. It is the consequence of what has gone before. So what is it that has gone before?

The Herodians, at the behest of the Pharisees, have challenged Jesus on the legality of paying taxes to Caesar. It's a legal/political trap. If Jesus declares it an illegal tax, he commits treason against Rome. But if he answers that it's legal he offends Jewish nationalists. (The danger is very real. In a little over 30 years (66 CE), they will revolt over poll taxes.)

Jesus asks them to bring a coin used to pay the tax &, when they supply one, asks them whose face & inscription they see. They answer, "Caesar's." (At this point it should be noted that only coins from the imperial mint bore images & inscriptions—& *they honored Caesar as divine*.) Jesus uncovers two problems for the Herodians here. First, they have a coin—which exposes them as collaborators with Rome. Second, Jesus has asked them to reveal what they see in that which they hold. Is it a gift from God? No. What they see is Roman tribute—an instrument, a gift if you will, from Rome with all the baggage that entails.

The consequence? They reveal themselves for who they are. At least in this moment, they belong to this world & to Rome. They do not see God.

So what do we see? For Jesus this isn't a problem. He sees all things & everyone as belonging to God. Even Caesar is seen as a child of God, beloved of God, employed of God (though erring, I'll grant, in a fair number of areas). Can we say the same for ourselves? When we lift up certain names or individuals—Barack Obama, John McCain, Sarah Palin, Joe Biden, President George W. Bush, Vice President Cheney, Bill &/or Hillary Clinton, Wall Street moguls, CEOs of AIG & Bear Stearns & Fannie Mae & Freddie Mac—do we see them as a part of God's economy & reign? When we think of disasters—e.g. hurricanes, tornadoes, wildfires, war, financial collapse, global warming—do we see God at work (not in the sense of causing these things but rather of a loving, compassionate & healing response)?

When we look into the coin, when we look into the face of our neighbor, do we see Caesar or do we see the face of God?

There is a means of grace that seems perfectly apt for this Bible story. But it also holds a key to the way we see. Before we get into that, however, let's review what we've covered so far: One Condition: "a desire to flee from the wrath to come, & to be saved from [our] sins."

Rule #1: "By doing no harm, by avoiding evil of every kind."

Rule #2: "By... doing good of every possible sort, & as far as possible, to all."

Rule #3: "By attending upon all the ordinances of God." (*The Book of Discipline of TUMC, 2004, pg. 48*)

The ordinances of God covered to date: communion, prayer (both family & private), fasting or abstinence, the ministry of the word (either read or expounded), & searching the scriptures. The one remaining: the public worship of God. The means of grace covered so far: generous living, simplicity, intercessory prayer & meditation. The ones remaining: journaling, service, using our gifts & talents, & tithing. Which would you say is most apt for today?

Tithing. (*Groan!*) I know what you're thinking, "This is the time to tune out. Preacher's gone to meddlin', gonna talk about money." Admit it, we all feel a little like the farmer in the old story where he's confronted by the preacher who asks, "Tell me, Harry, if you had 100 pigs would you give 10 of them to the church?" Harry's response: "O pastor, you know if I had 100 pigs I'd give 10 of them to the church." The pastor counters, "Tell me, if you had ten pigs would you give one of them to the church?" "O pastor, you know if I had ten pigs I'd certainly give one of them to the church." Finally the pastor asks, "Harry, if you had one pig would you give a tenth of it to the church." Harry's response: "Now pastor, you've gone to meddlin'. You know I've got one pig!"

Yes, we're going to talk about money today—but only as a part of a much greater whole.

Church teaching on the tithe centers on God's command that we give one tenth of our income & one seventh of our time to the church. Treated legalistically & on just a surface level, tithing simply means figuring out what we have to give up in order to fulfill our obligations so as to be free to do what we want with the rest. It encourages us to be tricksters, to see with what we can get away. Conversely, treated as a spiritual discipline & means of grace, tithing becomes something so much more. Allow me to illustrate with a story from *Homiletics*.

"At a Wednesday evening church meeting, a very wealthy man rose to give his testimony. 'I'm a millionaire,' he said, 'and I attribute it all to the rich blessings of God in my life. I can still remember the turning point in my faith, like it was yesterday: I had just earned my first dollar and I went to a church meeting that night. The speaker was a missionary who told about his work. I knew that I only had a dollar bill and had to either give it all to God's work or nothing at all. So at that moment I decided to give my whole dollar to God. I believe that God blessed that decision, and that is why I am a rich man today.'

As he finished, it was clear that everyone had been moved by this man's story. But, as he took his seat, a little old lady sitting in the same pew leaned over and said: 'Wonderful story! I dare you to do it again!'" (author unknown)

Don't give a tenth. Don't give a seventh. God gave it all. God wants it all—no, not for the church but for the reign of God. God calls us to be good stewards of all the gifts we've been given for the up-building of God's reign among us. Here's where tithing fits in. It's not about paying the bills, keeping up the property, or supporting the minister & ministry. It's about investing our treasure—and thus ourselves—in what God is doing among us. And, while it tends to be proportional, it's not necessarily a tenth or a seventh. It's about the first fruits. It's about our treasure. It's about what really matters to us. Think of it this way. If we invest our treasure in the stock market, what do we do? We pay attention to it. If we invest the first fruits of our money & time into the church—whether it be a tenth, a seventh, a twentieth, hundredth, or all—

we begin to pay attention & to care about what God is doing in the church. Let's take this one step further. Do you know what the surest way to have a good turnout at a worship service is? Get the children involved. If our treasure is here, we'll be here.

Beyond that, if our tithes are the first fruits—if it is our treasure—it will change the way we see & treat everything else with which God has graced us. We will not see the face of Caesar. We will see the face of God. Approached in this fashion, tithing becomes a means of grace, a means of becoming good stewards in all things, a means of living in God's reign, of working for God's reign, of seeing in all things the call of God's reign.

So what do I want us to do this week? (question asked of Bishop Blake by a Texas 6-year-old) Take the time to identify where our treasure truly lies & invest it in what God is doing. In all things, not just in the church but in all of life, "...render to God the things that are God's."