

*Sermon by the Rev. Jan O'Neil; St. Timothy's Episcopal Church; October, 15-16, 2011. Based on the Revised Common Lectionary Year A for the 18<sup>th</sup> Sunday After Pentecost: Isaiah 45: 1-7; Psalm 96: 1-13; 1 Thessalonians 1:1-10; Matthew 22:15-22. **The Other Side of the Coin***

Some Bible stories are stand alone drama. The language, the plot, the suspense, the twist can hold us in. I hope today's gospel story, perhaps misleadingly titled *Paying Taxes to the Emperor*, grabs your attention. First, we are jarred by the provocative words like planning to **entrap** Jesus and then Jesus noting the **malice** of his opponents before he calls them **hypocrites**. *Them sound like fightin' words*. And, second perhaps, it feels familiar. Do these words ring a bell? "Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's and to God the things that are God's." Have you heard them before? How many of you recognized this quote? Maybe you remember more the *King James Version*: "Render unto Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's?" We find almost these exact words that are in Matthew, also in Mark and Luke so this temple confrontation scene shows up each year in our lectionary. We might conclude that this story today tells us something important about Jesus and God, because three of the gospel writers tell it. Whether Caesar or "emperor" is the object, we get the point: it's about political power.

Let's look against this encounter. What a set up job this is! In this meeting the Pharisees, (the temple authorities) and the Herodians (who have a stake in keeping Herod and the Romans in power) try to trap Jesus in the synagogue. First they flatter him to death. Isn't this a reflection of all of us when we want a certain answer? We tell someone how wonderful they are before we ask for something. Kids are great at it. Hey, Mom what a great dinner. Oh, by the way I'm planning on staying out later than usual tonight. OK? Spouses are good at it. I dare to say we've all practiced many times and sometimes it works. Jesus' sparing opponents start out saying,

“Jesus, you are so sincere and you teach with God’s truth.” Thinking they have softened him up and backed him into a corner, the Pharisees ask Jesus whether it is lawful to pay taxes to the empire or not, fully knowing that if he says “yes” he will be going against the Jews’ resentment of poll taxes representing subjugation to the Romans. If he says “no,” he will be in conflict with the ruling Romans and could be arrested for treason.... But lo and behold, Jesus avoids falling into the trap and the people are amazed. He says neither “yes” nor “no” about paying taxes, rather he retorts, “Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s and to God the things that are God’s.” He doesn’t take sides on this one. Jesus comes off as brilliant, wise. The crowd leaves, perhaps disappointed they couldn’t boo him.

Jesus’ response is timeless and powerful because it tells us of the simple power of this Jesus so committed to God’s love while living in this world that is consumed with political and religious power. How can he be so liberated from such traps, and at the same time so incarnate, so fleshy....free from taxes, coins, idols—faces on coins of rulers claiming to be divine yet not feeling compelled to condemn their use? So, then, is this story really about money, taxes? The punch line is **not** about money or taxes; taxes are the throw away line. Taxes go to the empire: taxes for benefits rendered. Even so, this passage has been used by literalists to say we should pay taxes; we don’t have to pay taxes; support for separation of church and state; and all sorts of causes that miss the point.

Back to the story. Remember, the crowd has left, so we are alone here to ponder what we hear. Jesus’ punch line is clear: “Give to God the things that are God’s.” What??? We know that **everything** is God’s. So give God everything? That makes giving money look easy.

Let's imagine. What might our lives look like if we acknowledged that everything and everybody belong to God? That we belong totally to God. A few possibilities:

1. We could bask in being part of the humankind God created in Genesis; God creating man and woman in God's own image. What if God's abundance and radical generosity flowed through us, out hearts and heads, and hands? We would be able to let go of things. We would understand "enoughness" and would be brimming with gratitude. We would be generous in the way that God is generous. We would be able to embrace the world with open arms with the power of God's love.
2. What if we might live out Jeremiah's plea, that reappears in Romans, to circumcise our hearts, our inner guts, making room for God's love to transform us from the inside out?
3. What if our lives looked like the sacraments?
  - Like baptism? The gift of water and the Holy Spirit with promises by us and for us to strive for justice and peace among all people, to respect the dignity of every human being and to seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving our neighbor as ourselves.\* At the 5:00 service we had a baptism here for Caleb. The godparents made the promises for him, but we all renewed our own life in Christ. We vowed to give our whole life to God as did Caleb.
  - It might look like the Eucharist. We come to the common table for bread and wine as beggars with our hands cupped and open; the very same hands that cling to our coins are open and empty waiting to be nourished. What does it mean that I can approach the Eucharist with a beggar's pose reaching out knowing I am nothing without God? Emptying myself of everything so that I can offer myself to God and God can nourish me

on this journey? I can let go: knowing nothing I have, no coin clasped in my fist, can fill me up.

Continuing to imagine we might see ourselves loving God's world that we live in, not for power or control, rather for beauty and relationships and community because God declares this world is good. We would be co creators with God in this world—passing on God's love and allowing the power of love to transform the giver and receiver.

What would this mean to know that nothing is really ours and to acknowledge our radical dependence on God, returning ourselves to God-the-lover to whom we have always belonged? When we fail, we offer our brokenness, our bodies to the Eucharist at the table each Sunday. We continually offer back to God the gifts we have already been given. We give up making idols and images and all the stuff that coins represent: the seductiveness of controlling power. The flip side is that by giving up our whole selves to God we co-create with God; we can love the world through God even when things happen that we don't understand. We can embrace this mystery and by loving what God pronounces to be good we can be transformed and transform. To whom do we really belong? We imagine and pray. Nourished by God's powerful love and keeping our baptismal vows may we embody the care for God's world. May I, may we, be this other side of the coin...the side of giving and loving. While reaching out.....in generosity.

Amen.

*\*Book of Common Prayer*