

Mat 22:15-22

What is Caesar's and What is God's?

We here in the US are quite familiar with the term TAXES!?! How many of you enjoy paying taxes?

Well I for one personally thank you all...the irony is – I stand before you today because of the taxes you pay...you see I was a federal worker and that's how I made my earthly wages...but where do my allegiances lie when there's a conflict of interest? And that's exactly the question, and the trap, that is laid for Jesus in this gospel today...and that's exactly the trap most modern Christians fall into today as well!

Did you know that our great nation was born over a tax dispute. Taxation without representation is tyranny! Apparently those same disputes could be heard among the Jewish people living in first century Israel. First century Israel was a Roman colony and the Jews were paying taxes that supported the very army and government which occupied their country.

Now the American colonies had their loyalists – those loyal to England and The Jews had Herodians who were those allied with Herod who had been named “king of the Jews” by Rome and not surprising he made his own people pay tribute and taxes to Caesar...those that kept him in power.

The Pharisees, committed to Jewish law opposed paying taxes to Caesar for religious reasons. You see the coin that Rome used had made it even more deplorable to them because it carried the very image of the son of god...the divine Caesar.

Now the only thing that both these groups had in common was their disdain for this upstart rabbi Jesus. The Pharisees hoped he would support paying taxes to Caesar showing him to be a Roman sympathizer. And the Herodians hoped he would refuse paying taxes and they would label him as a traitor to Rome...either way they had him trapped...or so they thought!

So what does a coin tell us about who we are? In the US the coins in our pocket makes a moderate theological statement themselves, don't they? In God we trust! I wonder for us what has more of our trust... our money or our God...Well in the first century - in Caesar they trusted!

I wonder who we trust today?

So Jesus deftly sidesteps the trap and widens the scope with a question that has nothing to do with politics. He basically tells them everyone has to decide for themselves.

The question He is hinting at is - We all know what images our money bear – the people on them and the governments which they represent... but what is it in creation that bears God's image?

When Jesus says render to Caesar the things that are Caesars and to God the things that are God's... we want Jesus to describe our duties to Church and to State...to preserve our good standing as good citizens and people of good faith...

But things are never that simple with Jesus are they - Jesus is testing us! He's trying to turn around our point of view yet once again.

Jesus loves to disturb us... especially when we get comfortable... or when we buy into a wrong world view...focusing not on the Kingdom of God but rather the kingdom of man!

You see here we are dealing with our perception of WHAT belongs to whom and Jesus is pointing at the kingdom idea of WHO belongs to whom.

Caesar can stamp his picture and pedigree all over the place, but he will never come close to the true commerce that animates our being. In our world the rich and powerful always seem to collect the most coins and some people even get their "images" stamped or printed on the very money we bear.

We place our own icons all over the place too don't we? On our money, on our clothing...you can't escape it...I wonder what Twitter and Facebook are about? We all get to solidify our points of view and opinions all over the world. We get to bolster our own ego, we put it all out there all over the world...we get to proclaim to the world who we are...or more likely who we want the world to believe that we are...

Caesar wanted people to believe he was a god...so he proclaimed it in all the world...after all the coin said it was so. And who do you say you are to the world? Successful, Good looking, Smart, Well connected...well it must be true it's on FB...He tweeted it!

Vanity/ego...ery flattering indeed! We all get to feel good about ourselves and we will do everything in our power to sustain our fragile and fleeting ego...the false self...and we even get our own friends and family to help us buy in to this image that we have carefully created...

But what we hold true is always relative when it comes to our actual existence here – we are only beautiful for a little while. We are only successful for a little while...we are only smart for a little while...we are only healthy for a little while... and ultimately we are only alive here for a little while...

You see the coin in the realm of the kingdom of God, the currency Jesus is getting at - is our very own flesh and blood and spirit stamped in the image of the one who created us. What is rendered to God is whatever bears the divine image.

And it's not so much what's on the outside so much as the image of God stamped on the inside...our spirits. Pierre Tel Chardin said we are not Human beings having a spiritual experience, but rather we are spiritual beings having a human experience.

Every life is marked with the Creator's very own inscription, an icon of the One who is the source AND destination of all life... and all that is alive!

The words on the coin are a political threat, having everything to do with power and the maintaining of that power by any means necessary.

The coin that Jesus refers to is You and I. This is more about love and compassion rather than power and influence. We bear God's image and are watermarked in Baptism to be God's currency here on earth.

True that image can sometimes get distorted... especially when we look through the lenses of man...or try to see behind all the masks and facades that we wear everyday.

We tend to see the inscriptions of the labels the world has placed upon us. You are what you look like, what you wear, what you have, what you do... the groups you associate with. From the moment I was born I was labeled... Named with a very Italian name, born in Philadelphia, Male, First Born...so I had to act and even eat and like certain things specific ways... as was expected of me...and so I become them. I live into the labels I was first given as a child.

...all these labels we collect become a path in our lives...choices which many of us make without even knowing that we had a choice in the first place.

Nevertheless, underneath all those worldly labels ...underneath it all... is a much deeper mark...the kiss of light in the eyes...The watery sign of a cross made on the forehead... the image of a child in its mother's arms, and that divine spark that whispers as you take your very next breath.

All those faces are a part of your face when you begin to see the image that God sees, the image engraved on our hearts, banked with the full authority, faith and credit that Jesus paid for – for all the worth God sees in each and every one of you...and Our Heavenly Creator has given us a new set of labels for us to live by...Forgiven...Accepted...Worthy...Loved!

With all that's gone on in the world I want to talk a little about Stewardship... what are you all seeking here at Holy Family? We seek to all journey together

in experiencing God here and now. And why does the church care about your money? Why do you?

Betcha didn't know that Jesus mentions mammon (the Aramaic word for possessions and wealth) more than anything else in all His talking...why is that?

Because as Jesus says where your treasure is there your heart lies. God doesn't need your money, that's our earthly symbol of power...God wants your heart... and a generous heart always leads to a generous lifestyle...the kind connected in community...a community of God's own family.

This place here is your Church community – it has a small staff, and buildings and resources...but God really only cares about what we do with those things...who is in them...and more importantly what are our intentions and desires with regard to our church?!

We here at Holy Family make it our mission to be Christ in the world for one another... especially for those at the margins of our communities...those who have been labeled by the world as having less worth...

It falls to us to bring them God's good news...but not only by our words but especially by our actions...the good news that they are also accepted, forgiven and loved and that they too have brothers and sisters who care deeply about them right here in Laurel Springs!

For the stuff of Caesar is just an illusion of what the world places importance on...and we must continually ask ourselves...what holds value to you...What is our currency? Our stuff and possessions OR the currency of our relationships with God and one another?

Bottom Line: Do we love our stuff more than God...and more to Jesus' point do we value our possessions (The world's currency) above that of someone else's life and wellbeing?

So stewardship my friends is a discipline that we practice - at first to model the Christian posture... but then a transformation often occurs somewhere along the way...you see by emulating Christ we actually come to be the very heart of Christ...living into that label...the Spirit of God in the world!

And once we begin to see the world in this way...as children of the creator of the universe, well then we can never go back! At least that's what happened to me.

Just start small...Jesus says give a cup of cold water to someone who is thirsty. Listen and be Present for someone who is hurting. Give a portion of your blessings to others. Ultimately the goal is to give all of yourself to God by giving of yourself to others. Little secret: God gets it all back in the end anyway...

...is this gonna be easy – NO WAY! Bills, Challenges, To Do lists...But that's what we are all here for...to help each other stay focused and on the right path...and we are all in different places along the way...but remember start small...with a seed...a single step.

Begin by committing a portion of your financial blessings to this church, our people and more importantly to our mission in our community! You aren't doing this to change your church...you do this to change your heart... and in doing so you come to change the world around you!

I saw a bumper sticker once that said "If you love Jesus, tithe. Anyone can honk."

Disturb us Lord for sometimes we care more about what belongs to us... than what belongs to you...and in the end it ALL belongs to you anyway...doesn't it?!

I'd like to end today with a prayer attributed to - Sir Francis Drake -1577

Disturb us, Lord, when we are too well pleased with ourselves, when our dreams have come true because we have dreamed too little; when we arrived safely because we sailed too close to the shore.

Disturb us, Lord, when with the abundance of things we possess, we have lost our thirst for the waters of life; and having fallen in love with life, we have ceased to dream of eternity. And in our efforts to build a new earth, we have allowed our vision of the new Heaven to dim.

Disturb us, Lord, to dare more boldly, to venture on wider seas where storms will show your mastery; where losing sight of land, we shall find the stars. We ask You to push back the horizons of our hopes; and to push us into the future... in strength, courage, hope, and love.

Amen

Your faithful servant,
carmen