Pentecost 20 Proper 24

October 18, 2020

Matthew 22:15-22

The other day, we got an envelope in the mail with something we’ve known was coming, but weren’t exactly looking forward to getting: our annual property tax bill.

In Jesus’ day, taxes were just as much an unpleasant part of reality as they are for us. People paid a temple tax, which funded operations of the temple. They paid tax on their land, if they were fortunate enough to own any. They paid customs taxes. And they paid an imperial tax, one denarius every year for each person, male or female, free or slave. Everyone paid for the privilege of having a foreign power occupy their land.

Many Jews resented that imperial tax. It was a reminder that they were being kept from ruling themselves. To add insult to injury, the imperial tax had to be paid using a Roman coin, the denarius, which bore the image of the emperor Tiberius, and the inscription, “Tiberius Caesar Augustus, son of the divine Augustus.”

Basically, the coin the Jews were forced to pay their taxes with included a graven image of a false god, in clear violation of the 10 Commandments.

It’s easy to imagine how much this would have offended the Pharisees, who took the practice of their faith very seriously. So it may be surprising to see them teaming up with people called Herodians, people who were aligned with the king who ruled over Judaea, the king who was put in place to enforce the peace by Emperor Tiberius himself.

But perhaps this is one of those cases where the Pharisees figured that the enemy of their enemy was, at least in that moment, their friend.

As people whose faith called for them to engage in specific behaviors, the Jewish people of Jesus’ time had to figure out ways in which to live out the demands of their faith while living under the control of people who were at best indifferent to their faith; at worst, downright hostile and dismissive of it.

In other words, they had to figure out how to live *in* the Empire, but live *for* God.

It’s no different for us today, even if we don’t live under the rule of a foreign occupying empire.

But Jesus’ response, “render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and unto God the things that are God’s,” is frustratingly ambiguous. And intentionally so, I believe.

Because Jesus wasn’t more specific, didn’t spell out what he meant with his statement, we’re forced to make our own decisions. Perhaps what Jesus hoped was that we would ponder these words in our hearts, wrestle with them, in the hopes that they would nudge us away from our legalistic tendencies and toward contemplation about what obeying God really means.

Those legalistic tendencies seem to have been what bothered Jesus about the Pharisees. When the Pharisees saw Jesus and the disciples walking past a field on the Sabbath, and witnessed the disciples picking grain so they could eat, the Pharisees were outraged. The disciples were violating the Sabbath by working.

But Jesus reminded them that hungry people need to be fed.

When the Pharisees witnessed Jesus heal a person on the Sabbath, they were outraged. He was violating the Sabbath by working.

But Jesus reminded them that people who are sick need to be healed.

In neither case, Jesus argued, should people be forced to wait for mercy. Instead, what could be more in line with faith in God, more in line with loving your neighbor, than feeding them or making them whole?

It seems that Jesus would have wanted the Pharisees to understand that obeying God’s law should not interfere with “carrying out God’s will” for creation.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Instead, obedience is a challenge. How do we demonstrate love for our neighbors when we don’t know them, or when they are actively working to harm us? How do we keep the Sabbath holy when when we have to work on Sunday? How do we live *for* God while living *in* our world?

Understanding what Jesus said requires us to determine what belongs to God and what belongs to Caesar.

It’s easy to determine how much our property tax bill is, how much we owe each year in income taxes. Whatever is left after we pay those is what we get to keep.

But we cannot compartmentalize God like that. The Psalmist tells us, “the earth is the Lord’s, and all that is in it.”[[2]](#footnote-2)

As a part of creation, we belong to God, not to the empire.

Obedience to God, to the One who created us in God’s own image, means seeking out God’s will in all that we do. It means asking ourselves over and over what God would have us do, how God would have us respond to the world around us.

The way we exercise our faith should be integrated in all parts of our lives. Regardless of our circumstances, we are called upon to be disciples, to emulate the Redeemer who serves as our example for how to live and to encourage each other in our lives of faith. We are called upon to not just *believe* in God, but to *embody* the Gospel in all aspects of our lives: how we use our time, talents, and treasures; how we love our God, love our neighbors, and love ourselves.

We cannot compartmentalize God and be faithful disciples.

But we try anyway.

So thanks be to God for God’s abundant mercy, eternal love, and unending patience. Because we fall short. We get caught up in the trappings of the world, we get caught up in our emotions. We get distracted by false idols, by people and things that tempt us to an easier path than the one of discipleship.

But we cannot serve two masters.[[3]](#footnote-3)

We gather together for worship to reorient ourselves, to remind ourselves to whom we belong, to be experience God’s mercy and forgiveness, and encouraged to go out into the world practicing the peace and love and mercy we have been given.

Embodying the gospel in all aspects of our lives is a monumental challenge. It requires constantly seeking to understand God’s will for our lives and for creation. It demands humility — an awareness of our place in the universe which allows us to value the place of others.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Discipleship calls us into a relationship with God where we live *in* the world, but live *for* God by loving and serving our neighbors.

May it be so for us.

1. *Connections*, Proper 24, Matthew 22:15-22, Michael Lee [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Psalm 24:1 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Matthew 6:24 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. *The Rule of Benedict*, Sister Joan Chittister, p. 95 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)