

10-11-2020 CCI SERMON Matthew 22: 15-22 Give to God What is God's

Who here likes to pay taxes? Several years ago Rob and I got a taste of how the Jews in today's gospel reading felt about paying the imperial tax. We moved from Dubuque, IA back to Washington in 2014. For the next three years, Rob continued teaching online classes for the University of Dubuque, so we had to file Iowa state taxes for his salary in addition to federal taxes for both of our salaries. H&R Block thought they filed our taxes correctly, but in 2017 we received a letter from the State of Iowa saying that we owed over \$3000 more in Iowa state taxes for those three years. H & R Block figured out what was the problem and corrected our tax filings and we even got a refund, but through that process, we learned that nonresidents pay a higher Iowa state tax rate than Iowa residents paid. Think about that- even though we had not used any Iowa roads, and had not from any Iowa services like 911, fire or emergency services, we had to pay higher taxes. I was offended. That's how the Jews felt about the imperial tax.

The imperial tax was over and above routine taxes and it was particularly offensive to the Jewish people because the imperial tax funded Rome's occupation of their country. It paid for the soldiers who could beat people just for the fun of it. It paid for government officials' housing while the average Jew became poorer. It paid for all the Roman rules about what people could and couldn't do, and the prisons for those who protested, or could not pay their debts. The imperial tax reminded the Jews who was in charge and it wasn't them, or their religion, or their God. Caesar was in charge.

When the Pharisees and Herodians decided to trap Jesus, they thought they had the perfect question to do it. The Herodians were a Jewish political party who favored working with the government. They believed doing what the Romans demanded kept the peace. The Pharisees wanted the Romans thrown out and the Messiah to become King. But these two groups put their differences aside and asked Jesus their "perfect question": "Is it right to pay the imperial tax to Caesar or not?" If Jesus said to pay the tax, his followers would desert him, and if he said not to pay the tax, they could report him to the Romans for treason. Either way, they could get rid of Jesus.

Jesus recognized their trap and asked for a Roman coin. Looking at the coin, he asked, "Whose image and title are on the coin?" The Roman coin had the image of Caesar with the inscription, "*Tiberius Caesar, august son of the divine Augustus, Pontificus Maximus.*" The coin declared that Caesar was divine, was a god like all the previous Caesars.

Then Jesus said those famous words, "Give back to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's." I imagine him tossing that coin back to the man as he said it. After all that coin was just money, nothing but a man-made tool to purchase things and services and pay your taxes. It wasn't truth, it wasn't eternal, it was just money. So give Caesar back what is Caesar's - his coins- but nothing more. And give to God what is God's- and nothing less.

Ah, Jesus has changed the discussion from a question about taxes to a question that matters so much more- whose image has our heart's allegiance? Roman coins carried Caesar's image; whose image do we carry?

Jesus knew his hearers would hear echoes of Genesis 1 in his words.

*So God created humankind in his own image,
in the image of God he created them;
male and female he created them.*

We carry God's image, not Caesar's. We owe our heart's allegiance to God. This theological truth seems so easy to keep central when we gather together for worship or Bible study. We sang How great is our God, Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty that make clear it is God we serve, not Caesar. But that can get lost in conversations about taxes or politics, especially during an election year. In all the hoorah and emotion, we can forget that while we may feel strongly about our political loyalties, before we are Democrat, Republican, Independent, Green Party, Libertarian, or anything else, we are **Christian first**. And in these challenging times in our country, it is important to remember that ***even before we are American, we are Christian first***. We are not American Christians; we are Christians who are also Americans.

When our primary allegiance is to God, our guide for how we think, how we live, or how we vote is no longer our political party, the American flag, the American constitution, or what we believe are our personal rights. The constitution and other laws can tell us what the law says about many issues, but they cannot guide us on the moral questions of our day- like whether we should stand or kneel during the national anthem, what to believe about life before birth, how to design a tax code, how to treat immigrants at our borders, whether to wear a mask or take a vaccine, or how to treat people whose religious faith, political beliefs, language, or sexuality are different from our own. Our allegiance to God is our guide. It is our faith in Jesus Christ and his teachings that guide us. Give to Caesar what is Caesar's, yes, but no more. Give to God what is God's- yes, all we are and all our heart's allegiance- and no less.

Jesus brings all the confusion down to the ultimate question: To whom or to what do we give our primary allegiance- the allegiance that guides our lives and choices? As Christians, our allegiance belongs to God. We live and stand for who and what Christ stands for, AND we do so with the attitude of Christ.

But even that is not so simple. Sometimes Jesus' allegiance to God lead him to calmly stand **with** those who were being marginalized such as when he called children to himself and taught us how to be humble servants, when he touched and healed outcasts like lepers no one else would touch, welcomed tax collectors and prostitutes to come follow. We love Jesus' way of being with "the least of these." But other times Jesus' allegiance to God lead him to stand **for** marginalized people by making some "good trouble" like when he angrily threw the money changers and animal sellers out of the Temple place designed for Gentiles to come and quietly pray to God. He yelled and cracked a whip! Jesus broke Sabbath rules because the Sabbath had been turned into an excuse for harming and depriving people. And he got thrown out of the synagogue for it. More than one way for Jesus to act- which do we follow? Both. Whether Jesus was calmly loving or causing noisy good trouble, his behavior came from his allegiance to God and what was important to God. And he calls us to do the same.

Following Jesus will take some of us down different paths in today's issues, but it has always been that way. The church in Rome was divided over whether it was right to eat certain kinds of meat, and whether it was right to celebrate holidays or not. Some said yes and some said no and they fought over it. Paul told them not to be judges of each other, but to be fully convinced in their own minds, to do whatever they did "to the Lord." Paul said to let our allegiance to God shape our decisions on choices that aren't clearly right or wrong, and to also shape our attitudes toward those who disagree with us.

So where does all this leave us as we face the everyday decisions of life and as the bigger decisions of this election season? Well, we certainly hear Jesus saying clearly that if we owe taxes, pay them. We don't have to like taxes, but we do have to pay them. Caesar is to get what's due him. How do we make choices in a complicated world that tends to create winners and losers? I have my passport here that declares my identity and which country I am a citizen of when I travel. Pastor Barbara Brown Taylor says that if we check closer, we'll "find two passports... - one that says we are citizens of heaven, the other insists we are taxpayers on earth." We have dual citizenship in this life, and it is left to us which one is our primary allegiance that guides our choices and our lives. Caesar or God?