

The Rev. Sharon A. Benton

October 19, 2008

Plymouth Congregational UCC

Give to God...

Matthew 22:15-22

It's a political time of year.

A time when churches try to be very careful about how we advocate for issues affecting our state and country.

Even issues that are near and dear to the heart of our progressive faith:

questions of justice and peace and freedom of religious worship.

Less than 3 weeks remain – 16 days – until our national elections ...

an event for which many of us were taught to check our faith at the door of the voting booth.

That's been a long-held injunction in the liberal line of thinking; and a reason why, until recently, Democratic candidates have generally avoided speaking about their faith or affiliation.

Secular versus sacred.

Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's.

Yet we know, as Christians, that our faith speaks strongly to our actions, our political choices.

We have spoken our faith in the public square and we won't

be silenced by rigid applications of church versus state dogma.

We *cannot* separate God from our votes – nor would most of us choose to!

Because we recognize our faith as intrinsic to *all* we do: public or private.

It is also that time of year when money makes its way into our conversations around the church.

Stewardship season –

when we try to match our annual giving with our hopes & desires for church programs in the next year.

It's a time when many faithful folk ask:

can't we leave this big pain-in-the-butt topic of our everyday lives *out* of our service of worship?

Set this one thing aside,

with all the cares and worries it brings,

with all its touchiness and taboo nature,

with all our hidden fears and secret desires for it?

Can't we just leave money *out* of faith?

Secular versus sacred!

Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's.

Again, we know as Christians that our faith speaks strongly

to our financial choices,

to where we invest our lives,

even to our fears and desires.

There is no separating the secular from the sacred for those who answer the call of Christ.

Jesus didn't win any popularity points for discussing such things: money was a touchy topic then as now.

So touchy, in fact, that it's exactly the reason the Pharisees chose it as the subject to entrap Jesus.

~~~

Money, politics and faith are inextricably intertwined in today's reading.

Here we have the Herodians, overt supporters of the Roman regime occupying Israel,

and therefore representatives of the government and its taxes.

And working with them are the Pharisees, the religiously powerful who choose to work *with* the ruling party; and it's these who pose a supposed question of religion:

*"Does it accord with Torah – with Holy Law – for Jews to pay taxes to Rome?"*

Either answer, yes or no, will get Jesus in trouble.

A YES response on the ballot means pay the taxes  
 ...and get his Jewish followers seriously ticked off:  
 what kind of Rabbi – what kind of *Messiah* – would condone exploitation  
 of their ancestors' God-given land and reduction of their religious freedoms?  
 How could he speak in favor of his people's oppression?

On the other hand, a NO vote will necessitate the ruling government  
 to take him into custody for rebellion:  
 not paying the tax – *instructing his followers* not to pay the tax –  
 well, those are just the words the emperor's men need.

These are the politics of the scene:

The Romans, the religious leaders, the common people, and Jesus.

Either way, his interrogators win;

because this outspoken radical must either be arrested  
 or lose the support of his governmentally-frustrated and economically-burdened followers.

~~~

Don't we all wish we could be as quick on our mental feet as Jesus is in the face of such direct challenge?

Can't you just picture the Pharisees and Herodians plotting,

almost giddy with anticipation,
 and then so caught off-guard –

glancing around at one another,

confused about which side Jesus had failed,

trying to figure out just who he'd alienated ...

and then realization slowly dawning in their eyes –

jaws beginning to clench,

backs stiffening with the lust for retaliation.

I imagine Jesus' followers responding much the same way at first:

concern for their leader, then confusion –
 wracking their apprehensive brains
 to follow the reasoning of their teacher's answer:

"give therefore to the emperor...".

<what?>...<oh no!>...<but wait>...<huh?>

And in the final analysis, I imagine that their initial jubilation – sparked by Jesus outwitting his opponents –
 was tempered.

Cooled

as the understanding of what Jesus had meant

began to set in.

"...and give to God the things that are God's".

~~~

Money, politics and faith.

After months of political ads  
 and after weeks in a failing economy,  
 we're fried.

Exhausted.

And just when we may wish to disengage for a while –  
or hope to find some part of our lives safe from one or the other –  
the Gospel of Jesus won't let us go!

I didn't pull this passage out of the air – it's actually the text given for this week in our cycle of readings.  
Jesus' stories continually manage to draw us back into the muddle of this life ...  
and then even take us *beyond* the original conversations.

While we begin our questions at one outwardly crucial point –  
perhaps around taxes, since there are a few of those choices on Colorado's ballot this year –  
Jesus answers, "Give therefore..." ... and then takes it further.

While we hold our concerns as his economically-burdened followers –  
similar to our first century counterparts,  
facing debts  
and a government that acknowledges a *seemingly different God than the one we know* –  
while we wait with held breath for Jesus to take our side against the powers that be,  
he pushes us, adds another layer: *"give to God the things that are God's"*.

The head engraved on the coin makes it clear to whom the money belongs once Jesus declares,  
*"give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's"* –  
there it was in living color,  
stamped with the emperor's title  
and the emperor's image.  
It belonged to the emperor!

But what about the things that are God's?  
This is the part where we sometimes stumble – all of us – pausing like the disciples at the weight of Jesus' words:  
because *"what is God's"*?

Psalms 24 begins: "The earth is God's own and all that is in it".

Creation: God's image is all over it.  
We witness God in the mountains and  
the rivers and  
every living thing.  
We behold God in the  
changing of the seasons and  
the cycles of life and death.

And as if that weren't enough, the faithful religious folk surrounding Jesus would find,  
tugging at the back of their minds,  
the stories of their ancestors –  
and connect that image of God  
as being stamped on each and every one of them.  
"Then God said, 'Let us make humankind in our **image**, according to our likeness;' . . . .  
So God created humankind in God's **image**,  
in the **image** of God he created them;  
male and female God created them".<sup>1</sup>

~~~

“The earth is God’s own and all that is in it”.

All. ...Even that coin. Even the emperor.

All.

When put into this perspective, giving money to the government is simple:
it’s a small portion, happily calculated for us.

Giving relative loyalty to that subordinate emperor is the easy part, seeing that it’s all God’s anyway –
but knowing that we’re “all-in” ultimately;
owing absolute, every-moment-commitment
to the God we follow;
giving without limits

all that we *are* and

all that we *own* and

all that we *do*

to the Creator of all;

acting on our faith in public and private,

from the polling booth to how we steward our money –

that’s the challenge that Jesus presents to his hearers.

And so this passage from Matthew leaves everyone uncomfortable:

the Herodians,

the Pharisees,

Jesus’ followers in that time and place ...

and us.

Because it’s a hard path we’re called to,

this giving ALL to God

despite the emperors of our world:

our country,

our culture,

our family,

whatever else seems to claim our greatest allegiance.

The challenge we undertake every day is giving to God that which is already God’s.

...Yet interspersed amidst that challenge are glimpses of hope and understanding:

that we’re not essentially *giving up* anything.

God has already done that.

Has given us *everything*.

We’re just giving back.

And, to me, that is what’s so liberating about this passage.

~~~

Money, politics and faith.

God help us.

Yes! God does.

Amen.

---

<sup>i</sup> Genesis 1:26-27