

# “About What We Give”

## *Valley Presbyterian Church Sermons*

October 19, 2008

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Psalm 96:1-9

Matthew 22:15-22

One of the rallying cries of the colonists leading up to the American Revolution was “no taxation without representation.” Their dissatisfaction over taxes being sent back to England ultimately led to the infamous Boston Tea Party and subsequent acts of rebellion. But, not everyone was so willing act on their dissatisfaction. Many colonists were at the time and continued to be British loyalists, and others who felt taken advantage of by Mother England were unwilling to act out their frustrations. They likely felt as if their lives were being lived with one foot in two separate continents; they were – in part – both English and American (whatever that meant). They belonged both to the world they knew and the one that was still being discovered.

Where, then, should their allegiance rest? The colonists fought for survival, and in some ways benefited from the protection and prestige of the British Empire. And yet, they also had to protect their families, help their neighbors, support their churches, and uphold their local officials. Sometimes, there seemed not enough left over to pay a tax that would go back to King George. After all, why should he decide what they ought to pay? Why should the colonists be compelled to pay a tax without a voice in deciding how the revenues would be spent?

At the very outset of his ministry, in chapter four of Matthew, Jesus declares that the kingdom of God has arrived. The rest of the gospel, then, assumes that those who follow Jesus live with one foot in this world and one foot in God’s kingdom. Therefore, everything Jesus teaches to and demands of his disciples is dependant upon their willing recognition of and participation in God’s kingdom. Jesus is proclaimed as God’s rightful king; Christ alone rules both heaven and earth.

It comes as no surprise, then, how closely politics and economics are related with our belief in God. Over the past two-thousand years, the name of Jesus has been invoked in support of poverty and peace, prosperity and war. Our nation was founded with a Constitutional protection for the free practice of religion. Yet, we still continue to debate about religious issues in the public sphere: such as teaching evolution, displaying the Ten Commandments in public areas and prayer in schools.

How much simpler things would be if we could cleanly divide between church and state, religion and politics, God and Caesar. But, while Jesus reminds us about our ultimate allegiance to God, he does not determine for us which things are ultimate. Our temptation is to compartmentalize life into neatly defined sacred and secular areas. But, as God reminded us through the gift of Jesus, all of us are created in the image of God; thus all that we are and have belongs to God.

Jesus is asked whether it is appropriate for a Jew to pay taxes to Rome. Although his questioners open this dialogue with compliments – calling him a man of integrity; a teacher of the truth – their flattery is insincere. They are trying to trap Jesus; to trip him up with a question that cannot be answered without self-incrimination.

At issue is the payment of a census tax – also called a head tax – which was a flat fee imposed on every adult male. It's like the census that brought Joseph and Mary to the town of Bethlehem for the birth of their son, Jesus, in the stable. But, it's unlike any tax that we are compelled to pay in our modern context: different from a sales tax, an income tax, or a property tax.

We have the chance – living in a democracy – to vote whether or not to endorse taxes levied against us by supporting a particular position or candidate. But, in ancient Rome, no such choice existed. What Caesar said, the whole Empire was compelled to do. And, to add insult to injury, this census tax had to be paid using Roman currency: coins with the image of the Emperor imprinted on one side and a testimony to his divinity on the other.

You can imagine, then, how distasteful it would have been for a faithful Jew to pay this census tax. Not only were they forced to give their money to the enemy, but they had to commit blasphemy in the process. History shows that some Jews had refused to pay – before, during and following Jesus' lifetime – and they suffered the predictable consequences. Most, begrudgingly complied and some – including the tax collectors and many of the Jewish officials, found ways to profit from their relationship with Caesar; it may not have been good for the whole people, but lucrative for some individuals.

Jesus is asked to give his opinion about this theological, economic and political sore spot. Once again, the Jewish leaders think they have Jesus cornered. If he says, "pay the tax" then he will be seen as turning his back on his own people and their Laws. But if Jesus says, "don't pay it" he will have put himself in hot water with the Roman authorities. There seems to be no good answer.

Maybe that's why Jesus answers their question with another question. "Show me one of your coins, whose image and inscription are on it?" Jesus knows, of course, just like they know: there's a stately picture of Caesar on one side of the coin, with a title about his expansive power on the other. But, take note who had the coins at the ready; not Jesus his pockets were empty. But the Jewish leaders had them at the ready – inside the Temple no less – because they were what gave them their sense of importance.

And, notice also the words that Jesus uses here: coin – a currency with a certain number to represent its made-up value; portrait – a posed, made-up likeness of a person; inscription – some fancy, made-up words. Everything that this coin represents is man-made and temporary. It has no real or intrinsic value. On the other hand, that which does not belong to Caesar – Jesus is teaching them – has divine and lasting value: it bears the likeness not of whatever Emperor has risen to power, but of God the creator, the image of which has been passed on to us.

“Jesus told us to be very, very careful in our dealings with Caesar,” says Bishop William Willimon. “Don’t give glory to Caesar; that rightly belongs only to God. But Jesus didn’t tell us what exactly Caesar owns and what belongs to God. So we’ve been uneasy ever since, when we’ve been faithful. Not to be uneasy about Caesar means not to be faithful to Jesus.”<sup>1</sup> Maybe we should not be so quick to collect coins in our churches; maybe we ought to think more about what our offerings mean in church; what value they have; what it says about what we value most.

“Give to Caesar what is Caesar’s and to God what is God’s.” That is Jesus’ advice to us about how to live with one foot in the world and the other in God’s kingdom. This is Jesus’ guidance not just about whether or not we choose to pay a particular tax, but in every aspect of the stewardship of our lives: our time, our gifts, our vocations, our relationships and – yes – our material goods.

There’s that word: stewardship. You might have anticipated how easily this text could be molded into a stewardship sermon; meaning an appeal to use your money to support the church. True, in a few weeks, you will be asked to consider making a pledge of support for the ministry which takes place here. This doesn’t happen through a census tax like in Roman days, or by the graduated system of our income taxes, or through a percentage use charge like our sales tax. It happens through the commitment of families and individuals to give back some of what they have to God; not –as Paul says – out of compulsion, but freely: for God loves a cheerful giver.

“Give to Caesar what is Caesar’s and to God what is God’s.” When it comes time for us to decide how and to whom we are going to give of what we have, and we look for guidance in deciding what rightly belongs to whom, this scripture turns the question back on the questioner. “You must decide” Jesus is telling us. When you live with one foot in this world and one in the kingdom, it is our responsibility to discern and decide which things are to be guarded and which are temporary; which belong to God and which are of the world.

Despite the seemingly endless multitude of worthy causes that we feel compelled to support with our limited resources: hunger relief, AIDs relief, hurricane relief, justice causes, environmental concerns, schools, charitable foundations, churches, the fine arts; despite this seemingly endless demand on our material goods, Jesus urges us to remember that we have been created good: in the image of God; and therefore called to bear that same likeness in the world.

Sometimes, because we live in two kingdoms, there can be no truly right answer. Instead, there is only the necessity of choosing: of claiming for yourself that some things you are willing to give up – that taxes you are told that you owe, for example – but some other things – like your integrity and honesty and commitment to justice – you will hold on to because they have been claimed as belonging to God.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> William Willimon, “Thy Kingdom Come”

<sup>2</sup> Arthur Crosswell in *Lectionary Homiletics*, October, 2002

When you are asked to give your weekly offering to the church – or to make a pledge of your anticipated annual giving – you are claiming your foothold in the kingdom of God. In doing so, you are affirming the words of the old children’s hymn: “we love, because he first loved us.” To give is an act of love; and in order for it to be reciprocal love, we must not only receive, but also give. “Caesar’s wealth was not his to keep, and neither is ours. Christians believe that we are accountable to God for the gift of love and the way we use that gift. We are asked not to keep God in some sort of equal balance with all the other demands on our lives but to make sure that God takes second place to nothing and no one else.”<sup>3</sup>

Some things are temporary and are like currency; they can be bought, sold and exchanged. Other things belong to God, because they help us to bear the likeness of God. And so, Jesus advises us to be careful; don’t trade away, or give away, or sell to Caesar that which rightly belongs to God. AMEN.

*O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are God’s judgments and how inscrutable God’s ways! For from God and through God and to God are all things. To God be glory forever. AMEN.*

(Romans 11:33, 36)

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<sup>3</sup> Judith Johnson-Siebold, “Balance Sheet”