

Matthew 22:15-22

Sunday, October 16, 2011

Jesus is beginning to sound like a broken record. All we've been hearing lately are stories and demonstrations of judgment. By the end of chapter 21 the Chief Priests and Pharisees realized he was speaking about them. "They wanted to arrest him, but they feared the crowds". (v.45)

So they tried a more subtle approach. Paint him into a corner. Ask him a question in a way that, no matter how he answers it, they had him. Jesus would snare himself, and they would have him. It sounds like a great way to finally get rid of this back roads prophet who is making things tough for them.

Today's gospel is the first of three attempts by the religious leaders to get Jesus to hang himself though a public debate. They were done listening to stories. They were out to get him.

The problem was... they didn't know who they were dealing with. They failed to recognize that Jesus was the smartest, most clever man they would ever meet. He would not, could not, be trapped.

The first confrontation (today's) is an intriguing partnership between the Pharisees and Herodians.

The Pharisees are the "separated ones", the keepers of the Jewish Law, responsible for doing the right thing, and making sure others follow suit. They took great pride in knowing the Law in all its intricacies. They had a great responsibility to keep the nation pure by upholding the Law.

The Herodians were clients of King Herod, a more political group, supporting the King, who at this time was a pawn of the Roman Gov't. Herod's job was to keep the peace which meant enforcing the Roman rule while keeping their people quiet. They didn't want to draw the Emperor's attention. The Herodians had to play both sides of the political fence so the ruling power would be happy and the locals wouldn't get stirred up. They had a great responsibility to keep the Nation out of trouble.

With a combo like that... just maybe they could catch Jesus and get him to make a fool out of himself in public by saying something that would discredit himself and swing the popular vote in their direction.

But they needed a tough question. One that would nail him no matter how he answered... like when a wife asks her husband "*does this make me look fat?*"

I imagine they thought long and hard to come up with one. And they finally did.

"Is it lawful (right according to God's law) to pay taxes to Emperor Caesar?"

If Jesus said "yes" – he would prove weak, submitting to the foreign suppressor and loose the confidence of his own people.

If Jesus said "no" – he would be guilty of insurrection (sedition) and come under the wrath of the Roman government.

Either way... they had him.

What they didn't count on is that Jesus knew what they were up to. He sees their charade. He slips their trap by avoiding the "either/or" answer his opponents are expecting.

- “Show me the coin used for the tax.”
- “Whose image is on it? Whose title?”

*“Give to the emperor the things of that are the emperor’
and to God, the things that are God’s”*

Not only did he escape their trap, Jesus gave them questions of their own to ponder.

“What belongs to Caesar?” “What belongs to God?”

You might say that things that belong to the emperor are the things that his government supplies – the services he provides and demands payment for. Things like safety, protection, education, roads – services that make life together work. Those things are supported by taxes... coins given in exchange for services provided.

Jesus makes no statement about the equity or fairness of taxation, just that the government is due something for what they provide.

The bigger questions, however, is “What are the things of God?” “What bears His image?” We do.

You and I, created in the image of God, bought back by the sacrifice of His Son. We are His! And that is what Jesus asks us to give to God. You and I are what God wants.

So, what does it mean to *“give ourselves to God?”* (We can’t stick ourselves in an envelope and ship us off to heaven.)

+ Give ourselves to His purposes (do the things He is doing) – like the palmist we proclaim His glory among the nations, ascribe to the LORD the honor due his Holy Name!

+ Give ourselves to His practices (do the things the way He does them) – like the Thessalonians who were commended for their work done in faith, labor done in love, steadfastness in hope.

+ Give ourselves to His people – reclaiming the lost, the least, the longsuffering. “Those who say ‘I love God’ and hate their brothers or sisters are liars.” (I John 4:20)

We give ourselves to God by giving ourselves to others. By paying attention to the needs around us and do something to take care of it. (Family Promise; Food Bank; LOVE INC)

We give ourselves to God by taking our eyes off ourselves, off our needs and wants so that we can see the needs around us.

We give ourselves to God by sacrificing our time, our talents and our treasures, our very selves for the sake of others. We become the people of God doing the things of God, not for ourselves or for our reputation but for those around us.

We give ourselves to God by being there when someone needs us. By taking initiative even when it feels uncomfortable for us. By asking “is there anything I can do?” even when we don’t feel like we have much to give.

“Give to God the things that are God’s.” You and I are God’s (possession)

So we pray “Take my life and let it be, consecrated Lord to Thee... Take my hands and let them move, at the impulse of Thy love... Take my voice that I may sing always only for my King... Take my silver and my gold, not a mite would I withhold...”

But there is something else I need to mention that is His. This church.

What does it mean to give this church to God? Imagine what that would look like, if we were giving ourselves as a body, as a group to God.

- What would we be doing?
- Where would we be allocating our resources?
- How would we be engaged in the needs around us?

I'll leave you with those questions to work out.

Those who come to trap Jesus, walk away amazed by him. So too, will be the community of Belgrade (the world!) if we give to God the things that are His.

Amen