

The psalmist makes it pretty clear what belongs to God in the opening psalm we just heard, “The earth is the Lord’s and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it; for God has founded it on the seas, and established it on the rivers.” God has founded. God has established. God has created the earth and all of humanity in God’s image. We bear the divine imprint of the Holy One who founded and established the world. Keep this in mind, as you hear our text from the Gospel of Matthew this morning. Listen for God’s word to us through *The Message* translation.

<sup>15-17</sup> That’s when the Pharisees plotted a way to trap Jesus into saying something damaging. They sent their disciples, with a few of Herod’s followers mixed in, to ask, “Teacher, we know you have integrity, teach the way of God accurately, are indifferent to popular opinion, and don’t pander to your students. So, tell us honestly: Is it right to pay taxes to Caesar or not?” <sup>18-19</sup> Jesus knew they were up to no good. He said, “Why are you playing these games with me? Why are you trying to trap me? Do you have a coin? Let me see it.” They handed him a silver piece. <sup>20</sup> “This engraving—who does it look like? And whose name is on it?” <sup>21</sup> They said, “Caesar.” “Then give Caesar what is his, and give God what is God’s.” <sup>22</sup> The Pharisees were speechless. They went off shaking their heads.

Did you notice who went to entrap Jesus? It was not the chief priests. It was not the elders. It wasn’t even the Pharisees. It wasn’t the group that had endured the teaching of Jesus, which convicted them of the errors of their ways. No, the Pharisees sent their disciples – the Pharisees in training who are under the authority of their teachers. So, Pharisees in training as well as a few followers of Herod or Herodians were sent to entrap Jesus. We should note that these two groups make interesting partners, because the disciples of the Pharisees and the Herodians have different allegiances. The disciples claim loyalty to God and the temple, whereas the Herodians are loyal to Herod, a pawn of the Roman Empire. Yet, these two disparate groups partner together to entrap Jesus and they begin their attack with seductive praise!

“We know you have integrity. We know you teach the way of God accurately. We know that you are indifferent to popular opinion. We know you don’t pander to your students or show partiality to anyone! We know that you are great and wonderful!

When is the last time you received such praise? Was it sincere? How would you know? Context, context, context! This praise is hardly sincere given the context of the preceding passages in the biblical text, which I briefly shared. The chief priests and the elders had asked two questions of Jesus: by what authority are you doing these things; and who gave you this authority? What happens in response to this question is that Jesus convicts the religious leaders of their short-comings. It is clear from the text that the religious leaders – the chief priest, elders and Pharisees - definitely realized that Jesus’ parables were about them and they certainly didn’t like Jesus’ conclusions – the kingdom will be taken away from you.

So, when the question about taxes was asked, it shouldn’t surprise us that Jesus declared to the questioners, “Why are you playing games with me? What are you trying to do, entrap me?” Jesus was aware of their malice. In the New Revised Standard Translation, Jesus bluntly calls the disciples and Herodians, “Hypocrites.” For they say one thing and do another thing!

Now scholars suggest that the tax in question was a tribute tax, an imperial tax imposed on those who were conquered. The Jews would have felt this was a burden, while the Herodians would have supported it. So, keep in mind that this exchange with these leaders was not about paying or not paying tribute to Caesar; it was designed to "ensnare" Jesus so that he could be arrested, convicted and/or eradicated by those in power within the church or for the state.

Jesus knows their intention and so he turns the table as he so often does. "Show me the money," says Jesus. The money produced by either the disciples or the Herodians was an imperial coin. Jesus simply asks, "Whose head is on it?" They give the obvious answer, "The emperor's." So, Jesus responds, "Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's."

Jesus' response though is really ambiguous. He doesn't answer the question; instead he gives an even greater challenge than the one posed. Should we pay taxes to the emperor? "The relationship between faith and politics," as Debie Thomas suggests, "is too complex to reduce to platitudes or tweets." But, paying taxes isn't the real question!

As I wrote in my devotional on Wednesday, it is important to understand that Jesus isn't bifurcating the world into two distinct realms, the religious or sacred and the secular. Although, truth be told, we have done this bifurcating of realms throughout the ages. We have neatly kept God out of what we have deemed secular, suggesting that God is not interested or concerned or even present in the secular. We conveniently relegate God to the confines of the sacred and suggest God doesn't belong anywhere else. Can you see how easily this allows us to keep God out of places where we don't want God to go? Oh, this is just secular stuff, no need to bring God along!

No need to bring God along! This brought to mind a youth group memory! It seemed like every spring while I was in the High School Youth group the topic of dating was addressed. We would talk about how our faith informed our dating relationships. Well, one talk was especially memorable. A youth advisor reminded us that God was always with us and then he said, "Never forget that Jesus is with you, especially when you are at drive in movies, for Jesus is in the back seat!" Let me tell you, the youth of my church were never alone with their dates at a drive in movie!

This makes us laugh, but the reality is we often relegate God to some small sacred piece of our lives, maybe even to an hour or so on Sunday mornings. We label places or activities secular, because it makes it easier to keep God out – out of our check books, out of our relationships, out of families, out of our consumeristic tendencies, out of our political persuasions, out of whatever we want control over and don't want the scrutiny of our God. Unlike the psalmist, we find it hard to declare with conviction that, "The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it."

Barbara Brown Taylor, an American Episcopal priest, theologian and author, has written a number of books, but I share with you a couple of quotes from her book entitled *An Altar in the World: A Geography of Faith*. She wrote, "My life depends on ignoring all touted distinctions between the secular and the sacred, the physical and the spiritual, the body and the soul. What is saving my life now is becoming more fully human, trusting that there is no way to tell God apart from real life in the real world." She continues, "Whoever you are, you are

human. Wherever you are, you live in the world, which is just waiting for you to notice the holiness in it.”

Like the psalmist, Taylor acknowledges that the world we live in teems with God’s presence. Yes, “The earth is the Lord’s and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it.” All is sacred, not just some. “Notice the holiness in it,” says Taylor. Notice that what belongs to God, what is of God, is all of who we are and all of what we have and yes, all of it is holy.

Yet, it is easier to separate lives in sacred and secular and give the emperor what is the emperor’s, although none of us like tax season. It’s easier to give to our employers, what belongs to our employer, our time and energy for a given work week. It’s easier to give to our hobbies, our curiosity and enthusiasm. But, I believe it is much more difficult to give to God what is God’s. For what is God’s, but everything, for holiness abounds.

The disciples and the Herodians were hoping to ensnare Jesus. They were hoping to get the imperial authorities to arrest him for sedition or the people of God to disown him for heresy. Yet, Jesus turned the tables once again. We all stand exposed by the truth that everything – not just some of our time or some of our belongings or some of life - but, everything belongs to God.

Like the youth learning the lesson that Jesus is the back seat of the car at the drive in, may we realize ever more clearly that God is with us and interested in all aspects of our lives, interested in the way we walk through life. Not to catch or prevent us from doing wrong, but to infuse our daily lives with intelligence, energy, imagination and love, so that as we engage the world around us we bless the world.

What belongs to God? We do! So, in the words of the poet Mary Oliver, “Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?” Will our whole lives bear witness to the grace we have received from God? Or will only this hour or so bear witness? Will all of our actions, as well as our words, convey the love of God to those we encounter along the road of life?

An officer of the law arrives on the scene of an accident and he finds a woman screaming expletives at the other driver. The policer officer immediately takes the woman and handcuffs her and places her in his car, as the expletives keep coming. After she calms down a bit, the woman asks, “Why did you did you immediately handcuff me?” He answered, “Well, I figured you had stolen the car, given the bumper sticker said, “Honk, if you love Jesus.”

What belongs to God? This church does! This sanctuary does. The space under the sanctuary does. All of our church buildings do. All of us together, belong to God. Tell me, says Mary Oliver, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life First Presbyterian Church of Redlands? Will we convey the love of God in and beyond these walls to our community?

The Salvation Army is closing its facility in Redlands and has shut down its operations... this means there is no cold weather shelter in Redlands for this upcoming winter. I was contacted about our sanctuary basement as a possibility. Of course, given that it is still dirt and without heat it is not inhabitable. Yet, is there another space in our facility or in the facility of another downtown church for a cold weather shelter in Redlands? If this church and all churches belong to God... what would God do?

Jesus' simple statement, "Give to God the things that are God's," will continually challenge us to lay before God all of who we are and all of what we have. This is not a one-time recognition, but a continual reminder to lay before God our lives and the life of this church.

What belongs to God? Everything, for "The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it." Amen.