

Every morning, when I wake up, I gladly accept the breath that God has given me. I roll over, and see a partner who, God, again, in all Her infinite wisdom, has seen fit to add into my life. I walk down a hallway to look in on two little girls, who God made, and who have transformed my life in too many ways to count. I walk downstairs, often unmindful of the shelter above my head, built from natural resources like wood, clay, and stone. I fill up a coffeemaker with water from flowing streams; I add in coffee beans harvested from the earth by the hands of people fashioned in God's image. In just the first five minutes of my day, I accept a substantial amount of God's provisions. Can you imagine how long that list of provisions would be if I tracked an entire morning, or even an entire day?

It's funny though. I don't ever remember racing to the post office at 11:58 pm on April 15th to settle our annual account. To my knowledge, I've never paid God's park ranger to admire a tree-lined walk, or to pull over on the side of a mountain road and explore a serendipitous waterfall. I'm certain I've never paid a fee for God to acknowledge my credentials, nor have I ever stood in line at one of God's agencies, hidden in a suburban office park on the other side of town, in order to convince one of God's bureaucrats that I have my proper documentation to throw a party, or drive a vehicle, or enhance a property. Or better still, to prove to God that I was born, am a person, and have existence!!! Or even worse, to have a loved one prove to God that I no longer have breath!!!

In the past, when I've preached today's passage, I've spent an awful lot of time seeking to discern that line, or that threshold, where we stop rendering to Caesar, and start rendering to God. In other words, I've wondered at what point does our conscious chase off the taxman, like a moonshiner chases off a revenueur? Sidewalks and schools and hospitals those are all fine, yes please!!! But what happens when the coins we collect are used to fund nuclear arsenals, or create programs that intentionally harm our most vulnerable neighbors? What happens when Caesar's programming is at odds with our faith?

In an election year, especially this one, we want Jesus to be more specific: what will the courts allow; who's the candidate of the God movement; how far can I go and not get an unsettling feeling in the pit of my stomach; what would you do, man?!?

Of course, Jesus never gives us a prescriptive answer. He just says, "Render to Caesar what's his, Give God what's Hers."

How annoying!

It's like watching *City Slickers* when Curly tells Billy Crystal's character Mitch that the secret to happiness is that "one thing." But Curly never says what the "one thing" is, and then Mitch comes home with a baby calf named Norman, and all of a sudden he's discovered nirvana. Does that mean we should all go be dude ranchers for a week?!?

I digress. Jesus' response points the accountability and the heart-rendering back toward us. Jesus tells us we've got to decide for ourselves what provisions we need from Caesar, and what we need from God, and where those result in competing interests, and how we will render or give back to the source of our provisions. In other words, Jesus reminds us that we've got to reconcile our obligations to both God and Caesar.

This week, in my floundering attempt to make Jesus give me a more qualified answer, I saw our text in a light I had never considered. This isn't a passage about pocket change, let alone taxes, let alone any sum of money. Instead, I think this is an illustration of God's vastness juxtaposed against Caesar's finiteness. In the Jerusalem Temple, a pointed reminder of God's constant, generous, salvific power and grace; a living monument to the Exodus story (the one that unfolded back then, and is still unfolding right now), religious and political leaders want to talk about pocket change!!! Pocket change?!? Really?!? The Pharisees, ardent and even authentic proponents of Torah fundamentalism are at odds with the Herodians, apologists for Rome's regressive taxes. And though staunch enemies, the two groups team together to trip up Jesus on a legal technicality. Pay the tax, and you offend righteous Jews. Refuse the tax, and you risk sedition. How taxing such pettiness must have been for Jesus!

There is tangible audacity. In the presence of one who channels divine truth, and on the site of a building intended to celebrate divine presence, these two groups want to condemn their opponent over taxes?!? Taxes?!?

But here's the thing. There is no time, no circumstance, no realm, where anything we receive from Caesar can compare to what we receive from God.

Yes, Caesar can take your breath, but he can't give it. Yes, Caesar can document and register your life, but he can't recreate it.

Caesar's very existence is beholden to a revenue stream. If the source runs dry, so too does Caesar.

Caesar's very existence is contingent on either the willful or compelled support of the people. If his support topples, so too will his kingdom.

God, on the other hand. God creates. God gives breath, and life, and being, and existence, and value. Sure, God's not gonna turn down our tithes, and yes, yes, yes, God will always invite us into loving partnership, but God's magnificence, God's love, and God's very existence are not contingent on our generosity, nor our subordination, nor our approval, nor even our acknowledgement.

God is Creator. Caesar is created. And here's one more glaring distinction. Caesar, a created being, a subordinate of God, insists on a world of subordination. God, the Creator of the universe, and the Supervisor of all things, insists on a world of partnership and collaboration. Perhaps the greatest miracle of the universe is not the creation of our planet, or the parting of the seas, or the even the fact that bears can hibernate, but is instead, God's humility.

So when Jesus flips that coin in the air, I hear a pin drop. Because what I realize instantly is that I live in a world, where so often, I am distracted by the finite miracles of Caesar, and because of these distractions, I fail to render gratitude for the infinite provisions of God. I fail to see the vastness, the generosity, the depth of our Creator.

Caesar requests my signature. And my money. And my vote. And even in the best of cases, my submission. And if I can't or won't give him those things, both he and I are weaker for it. And in 99.9% of instances, my punishment will be exacted – it will be swift, and transactional, and blind of empathy. Caesar will call this fairness or justice, but I'd call it rigidity.

God requests my heart. My mind. My strength. My soul. And even when I can't give Her some or all of these things, or I won't give Her all or some of those things, She is no less whole. God responds with empathy, with grace, with love. And even though Caesar might call this quality inefficient, or weak, or non-sensical, I call it justice and righteousness.

Jesus reminds us that a tax to Caesar is like a single provision of Torah – each have the ability to burden us. It's not that either are wholly good or wholly bad. Instead, it's that we get so bound up in following secular and religious laws with precision, that we often forget to honor the very things these laws or codes intend for us to do. And we get so twisted up; we convince ourselves that paying a municipal tax or healing the lame on Sabbath are anathema. Is God so small, so like Caesar, that the application of tax code or a rigid literalism are the only ways to ensure against alienation and abomination?!? Of course not!!! God's more complex than that. God's got more depth than that. God is love, not law.

And in his little exercise, Jesus demonstrates the hypocrisy of those who seek to entrap him. They are not interested in the intent of the law, but rather its weaponization. But what happens when you, the accuser, reveal that you use the very same to coin to fund your temple enterprise as the one that funds the offenses you decry? You realize your pettiness in the midst of God's vastness.

So yeah, North Carolina can have its seven cents on each dollar I spend. And I'll postmark my check to the IRS by April 15th. I use Caesar's provisions, and I'll gladly pay for them. But, but, but, if I am gonna render to God what is Hers, that means I need to be ready to call Caesar to account for funny math. In other words, if I choose to participate in Caesar's systems, I've got to be mindful of the places where such participation prevents me from being fully present in God's presence.

God encourages us, and Jesus does, too, to love God and love neighbor. That is to render empathy, compassion, respect, dignity, and hospitality to those we encounter, and to recognize our interdependence and rootedness in God and one another. That's the honor we're asked to render.

Pocket Change
Bob Stillerman
Proper 24. Pentecost 20, 10-18-2020
Matthew 22:15-22



a spiritually
progressive
community
of faith

So in this season, I think the question to ask ourselves is this: do our actions model the honor we are asked to render?

Friends, may God give us hearts to act – with our voices, with our votes, with our pocketbooks, with our choices, with our prayers – in such a way that we love God and neighbor. And may God give us courage to refrain from those actions that prevent the rendering of our hearts. May ours eyes be averted from shiny coins, and redirected to God’s vastness.

May it be so. And may it be soon!

Amen.