

Proper 24A – October 18, 2020 – St. Anne’s
Exodus 33:12-23; Ps 99; 1 Thessalonians 1:1-10; Matthew 22:15-22

Money, politics, and religion, oh my! Today’s gospel contains three of the things our culture tells us we *aren’t* supposed to talk about in ‘polite company’. These are topics that can be divisive, because we feel strongly about them. And we don’t like to be told what to do, or to be challenged, on our opinions, or our beliefs or our money. Which is just why **I** think we **should** talk about them at church – **not** so I can tell you what to do, but because I think it’s important to reflect on these issues from the vantage point of **faith**. Although, let me reassure you that I am *not* going to talk about the current elections that are underway in BC and in the US.

Taxes are a big topic in pretty much *every* election. We all hold opinion, usually very firm opinions, on taxes and how much they should be, and how they are distributed, and so on. Which makes us sit up and take notice when Jesus weighs in on the topic of paying taxes. But it’s not simply taxes in *general* that are being discussed in today’s gospel, but one *particular* tax. Like us, Jews in first century Palestine paid numerous taxes: they had Temple taxes, land taxes, and customs taxes, just to name three. But the tax named in this passage was a particularly onerous one for ancient Jews. It’s the *kensos* - a flat-rate tax on all adult men and women levied at the rate of one denarius per year - that is, for poor people about one day's wage per year. Which was pretty onerous for poor people, but even *worse* - it was a ‘tribute’ tax. A tax raised specifically to pay Rome back for the cost of the Roman occupation of Israel. So, first-century Jews were required to pay their oppressors for the cost of their own oppression. And, to add insult to injury, the tax could **only** be paid with Roman coins that were not just legal tender but also pieces of propaganda. So, it’s hardly a surprise that this was a deeply, *deeply* hated tax!

Most likely the coin in today's story bore the image of the emperor Tiberius who ruled Rome during the time of Jesus ministry. One side of these coins deified Tiberius as the "son of the divine Augustus," while the other side honoured him as the "Pontifex Maximus" or "chief priest" of Roman polytheism—which is to say that the two sides of the coin celebrated Tiberius as a 'god' with absolute religious *and* civil authority. For Jews, paying this tax using *this* coin was deeply religiously *offensive* as well as politically humiliating. So, the question put to Jesus by the Pharisees and Herodians about this hated tax was a trap. Saying "Yes, you *should* pay the tax" would have discredited him with those who found the imperial domination system unacceptable. Saying "no", and thereby encouraging tax-dodgers and zealots, would have made him subject to arrest for sedition. So Jesus very neatly dodges the trap with his ambiguous answer. **But**, just like the parables, there's more beneath the surface of this seemingly innocuous answer.

Some of us probably remember this passage best from the King James Version. "Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesars." Which in many ways is actually a better translation than our more modern "Give to the emperor what is the emperor's..." because the Greek word translated as 'give' means "to give back, or return." So, the first half of the saying is roughly, "It's Caesar's coin -go ahead and give it back to him." We can imagine Jesus saying this with a dismissive shrug. Rather than a pronouncement about the legitimacy of Roman imperial rule or political authority in general, his words are a brilliant way of evading the *trap*. *But* then he adds the second half 'and give back to **God** what is God's.' Which of course, begs the question "just what **does** belong to Caesar, and **what** belongs to God?"

Well, one possible way Jesus might have intended us to hear this is by thinking about the coin. How do we know it belongs to Caesar? ... It was made with Caesar's image on it. So how do we know what belongs to God? Well, according to Genesis *what* was made in God's image? ... **Us**. So, what are we to give to God? *Ourselves*. We are to give God our *whole* self. We can't say "this part belongs to God so I'll give it to God, but this part is mine so God has no claim on it". Everything we are and everything we have came from God and ultimately belongs to *God*. Including our very life. And so, Jesus is reminding us to give (back) to God everything we are and everything we have.

So maybe what Jesus is doing here is inviting us to declare our **allegiance** – do we believe and *act* like we belong to 'Caesar'- the world of powers and principalities - or do we believe and *act* like we belong to God? And that takes us back to thinking about money and politics. For while, we may *indeed* feel strongly about our political loyalties, before we are Liberal, New Democrat, Green or whatever - we are Children of God. And while we may *indeed* be **quite** convinced that how we spend our money is **our** business and no one else's – that belief is the result of forgetting *whose* image we are made in and who we belong to. Our secular culture encourages us in a *million* ways both big and small to think of ourselves first and foremost as an **individual**. To believe that what **I** want or think or prefer is what matters. But, the problem with thinking of ourselves as belonging first and foremost to **ourselves**, is that it allows us to easily succumb to the temptation to believe that we are *no more* than: the job we do (or did), or what kind of home we live in, or to imagine that our bank account tells **anything at all** about our worth and value as a person.

There are elements of our lives that should be “rendered to Caesar.” For example, it’s our *civic responsibility* to pay our taxes to support the collective needs of our country or city, and to vote to help choose the next government. But our *deepest* self belongs to *God*, and if we **remember** that, all of life takes on greater focus and meaning. Because when we take that identity seriously it shapes our behavior - urging and helping us to **be** the person God created us to be.

The question the Pharisees and Herodians put to Jesus concerned *money*, and whether a *particular* tax was ‘legal’ for Jews to pay. Which is a very narrow question. But Jesus’s answer broadened it to embrace **all** of life — which **does include** how we use our worldly treasure but is not *limited* to that. Money is one of the chief symbols and tools of our lives. Money **does** give us power and status - carrying with it the choice of either doing good or doing harm. So, *how* we use our money and all our other gifts is a *reflection* of our actual **relationship** with the God who **gave** them to us. Whether we like to think so or not.

So, I invite you to try an exercise to help you think about how your own use of money reflects **your** faith. These days most of us make the majority of our purchases using a debit or credit card. So, when our worship service is over, I invite you to pull out your credit card or debit card and use something like a sharpie marker to put a small cross on the card. Just let it dry for a few seconds before putting it back in your wallet. The mark will eventually wear off, but in the meantime every time you buy something, let that little cross remind you that **you** are a beloved child of God. And let it *also* invite you to reflect on whether or not that *particular* purchase and indeed, all the ways you use that card, aligns with your values and your God-given identity. In other words, how **does** your *faith* impact your everyday decisions about what you do with whatever money you

have? My hope in suggesting this, is that the action of *intentionally* reflecting on this whenever you use your card, will help to root your ‘secular’ life in your faith and help you to think about how your faith shapes, or *doesn’t* shape, your life – particularly, in this case, your economic life.

Because how you use the time and money and other resources you have **is** a deeply spiritual issue. God wants more from us than polite conversation and token efforts. The cynic says that death and taxes are the only two certainties of this life, but each week we have the opportunity to declare that God’s **love** is more certain than anything else. Jesus says we should give back to God, that which is *God’s*. So, give back to God that which **is** God’s - **you**. You, in heart and soul and body and action.