

Text: Matthew 22: 15-22  
Title: Rendering Works  
Date: 10.18.20  
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I wrote a half dozen introductions to this sermon, and pitched them all. They were too political, too pointed, too partisan, too snarky, too convoluted. My favorite was a modern-day parable about tax policy. I had two friends read it and they urged caution. I thought it was a good hook. They worried that it would trip up some and send others sideways. I took their counsel.

My job is to get us into the text. My calling is to point toward Jesus and make sure that I get out of the way. Sermon introductions should serve only one purpose and that's to build an easy or engaging way into scripture. In these difficult days the last thing I want to do is distract from listening for God's voice. We sure don't need me trying to be cute or clever....

And this iconic text calls for our full attention. For while the church has wrestled for centuries with this passage it is still enigmatic. It's been used to prop up tax policy and spark tax revolt. It's been used to frame the separation of church and state, and it's been boiled down to "give your taxes to the government and your heart to God." But....

But, I think there's something more subversive going on here than accounting guidance, or a way to compartmentalize our financial and spiritual lives.

Consider....

In first century Palestine the Israelites paid several taxes: Temple tax, customs tax, land tax, etc. Nothing trickled down, everything was paid up, and most folks felt an oppressive boot on their backs. The rich were getting richer and the poor were getting pennies. So, surely Jesus would rally to the side of the last and the least to speak a word of justice about taxes.

However, the question posed to Jesus was not about taxation in general. Jesus was asked about a specific tax paid to Rome by those who weren't Roman citizens. And, in our text, the parties who were pressing Jesus for an answer were divided about this tax.

The Pharisees, who were ardent nationalists, probably opposed the tax.

The Herodians, who appeased Roman rule, probably endorsed the tax.

They made strange bedfellows (think: Tucker Carlson and Rachel Maddow).

And yet, they colluded to catch Jesus in a carefully worded web.

It's a sly exchange. First, they butter up Jesus, then they try to wedge him between a political rock and theological hard place.

If Jesus says "No, don't pay taxes to Caesar."

Then the Herodians can scurry off with evidence of treason.

If Jesus says, "Yes...."

Then the Pharisees can claim the high road of religious purity and denounce Jesus as a fraud.

But, Christ-like or clever, Jesus throws them a curve. He asks them to dig in their tunics and pull out the coin that was used for paying the tax – his pockets were empty. A good Jew would already be compromised by using the money, but nonetheless his interrogators produced the coin. On one side was a portrait of the emperor and on the other it read: *Tiberius Caesar Augustus, son of the divine Augustus*. A claim of sovereignty and divinity.

And then (maybe), Jesus rolled the coin around in his fingers, inspecting it with a slow familiarity. He let silence settle in. His questioners were waiting, thinking they had him stumped, or stymied, or snared....

Until Jesus smiled and asked about the image. (The word here is *eikon*, from which we get icon.) Then Jesus handed the coin back to them saying, “Well, give to Caesar what bears his image, and give to God what bears his.” And with that turn of phrase Jesus flips the whole thing on its head.

Tertullian, an early church father, interprets Jesus this way:

*(render) the image of Caesar, which is on the coin, to Caesar, and the image of God, which is on man, to God; so as to render to Caesar indeed money, to God your self. Otherwise, what will be God's, if all things are Caesar's?*

I like that distinction. It is as if, with a hint of satire, Jesus asks:

*You're worried about this – that this man printed his own image on? You're worried about this insignificant little piece of metal? You're worried about this? You bear the imprint – the image of God. You are stamped as God's own. Give to God what is God's....*

Or, as Tom Long puts it:

*Whether we call it taxation, tithing, or stewardship, there is a temptation to compartmentalize life (“I set aside this part for God, and the rest belongs to me and to Caesar”). What Jesus says is that, although we may have to live under this or that Caesar, and we may have to plunk down this or that tax, we are never Caesar's. We belong, body and soul, to the living God, we are to render to God what is God's.*

In the flip of a coin Jesus renders the whole tax question incidental and points again to primary allegiance. First and foremost, you bear the image of God. Your primary allegiance is not to state, commerce, political party, or profit margin but to God and the kingdom of God.

Therefore, dear friends, if the instruction is to give to God that which bears God image – what are we giving? What is essential to the image of God that we are re-gifting? What do we render unto God? What is our rendering work?

Three ideas...

My father was pious in the best sense of the word, humble, quiet, unwavering in love and companionship to my mom, and unquenchably curious. He was a Christian scholar who in the pursuit of truth would leave no stone unturned. There was no field of inquiry or discipline of study that was out of bounds.

So, he read all the time. At my basketball games, at my track meets, in the bath tub, and waiting up for me to come home late at night – a leg crossed, his finger resting on the side of his face, a book open, he read....

I resented it as teenager; I now know my father was rendering to God his mind. He was, as best he could, loving God with his mind. He was bringing rationality, curiosity, the study of scripture, and history, and different cultures and traditions....everything under the sun to the pursuit of God.

One part of bearing the imprint of God is seeking after God (truth) with our minds. It is not the only part, or the most important part, but it is part of what it means to be human. So, we struggle with scripture and we learn and stretch and grow and wonder and ask questions and...

And, while there may not be clear cut answers for everything.

And, while there are varieties of interpretations.

And, while there are all sorts of ways to learn and engage the mind.

To give back to God that which is essentially human is to seek after the mystery of God and the complexity of creation with our minds – even to wrestle with politics and equitable tax policy. To do less is to short change our rendering work. It is part of bearing the image of God.

Julie Miller is a waif of a woman, a singer-songwriter, who has long struggled with depression and mental illness. You can hear it in her voice – there's a fragility and unvarnished humanity. I saw her in a Chicago bar and over her husband's guitar she whispered and her voice cracked as she sang:

*You can have my heart, though it isn't new  
It's been used and broken, and only comes in blue  
It's been down a long road, and it got dirty on the way  
If I give it to you, will you make it clean?  
And wash the shame away*

*You can have my heart, if you don't mind broken things  
You can have my life, if you don't mind these tears  
Well I heard that you make old things new  
So I give these pieces all to you  
If you want it, you can have my heart*

It goes on. You get the idea.

The image of God, as we experience it in one another, is essentially broken. I don't know anyone – rich, poor, Christian, secular, black, white, hipster, spiritual but not religious, reformed, liberal, conservative, gay, straight – who isn't marred and messed up in some way.

Part of what we re-gift to God is our broken hearts. We give back our fears, our flaws, our better angels and our darkest demons, our mistakes, our grief, our shame, our whole selves, over and over and over, as is....

In confession and devotion, in prayer and truth telling, in AA and therapy, in silence and song we offer our hearts to God. I don't fully know how we give something that is so elusive, but I do think there's a lifelong process, even a discipline, to bring/give our hearts to God.

Calvin University uses a logo with the picture of a heart being held and offered in a hand. That image was taken from a seal that John Calvin used on his letters in the 1540s. Around the logo it reads, "My heart I offer to you Lord, promptly and sincerely." Wonderful image. Might be better if there was a crack in the heart. An essential part of our rendering work is offering our broken images back to God.

One final idea/implication.

It has always struck me that as God is Creator to bear his image is to be creative. In art and architecture, in music and machines, in software and hardware, in construction and patient care, in teaching and tax policy, in preaching and painting, in sports and the practice of law we create and recreate culture. We make and remake the world in which we live. We bring our bodies and our gifts to the work of tending after this garden.

And so, without sounding trite, to render unto God that which is essentially human is to care for this earth, to leave it better than we found it, to use our gifts for the good of others and the good of creation. And, there is an active, tangible, physical quality to this rendering work.

To give back to God the image of God is give back mind, heart, and body.

To render to God that which is essentially human is to render mind, heart, and body. When asked about the most important commandment Jesus put it this way:

*Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.*

Dear friends, you bear the image of God and that image was confirmed in your baptism. You are signed, sealed, and stamped as God's own.

Coins will come and go.

Empires will rise and fall.

Presidents and kings will end up in the dust bin of history.

Eventually all political noise will cease.

Even death and taxes will meet their end.

But, you bear the image of God.

You belong (body and soul, in life and in death) to God.

May each of us, in our own time and place, give back to God mind, heart, and body.

Amen.