**Giving to God in the Midst of Empire**

**Pentecost 20, Year A**

**October 18, 2020**

Matthew 22: 15-22 Russell Mitchell-Walker

In our reading today, the Pharisees and Herodians (leaders for King Herod) try to trap Jesus with a question of taxes. It would have been highly unusual for these two groups to be working together for they were ideologically and politically opposed to each other. However, their disdain for Jesus brought them together. They are gathered in the Temple to carry out their plan, where they ask Jesus whether it is lawful to pay taxes to the Roman Emperor. They figure if he says no, then he can be captured and punished, probably killed by the Roman Empire. If he says yes, he would lose supporters who see him as a leader against the Roman occupation. Jesus is wise and sees through this ruse, naming them as hypocrites. He asks them to show him the Roman coin, a denarius which is used to pay taxes. Now, they are in the temple where it is against Temple and religious law to have any Roman coin on your person. This is why there were moneychangers at the temple entrance, to change the money from Roman to Jewish coin. The Pharisees produce a Roman coin and immediately people can see their hypocrisy which Jesus already named in his response to them. By having coin with them they exhibit their complicity with the Roman system of injustice, in deference to their own laws. Jesus concludes with the statement: “Give back to Caesar, the things that are the Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s.”

Now many interpreters over the years have seen this as indicating support for the government taxes and the separation of church and state, that the church should not be political. However, present understanding rests on the latter part of this statement – give to God the things that are God’s. And what is God’s? Everything! All that we have is from God for us to care for and be good stewards of. As we move through our stewardship campaign, we are invited to consider what this means for our church community. What, in these challenging times are we able to give of our time, talent, or treasures?

What does giving to God what is God’s, mean when we are part of a system or systems that are unjust? We are to pay taxes, as that is part of the system we are in and we want to follow the law to avoid going to jail. So how do we find balance between our complicity in systems can be unjust and challenging those injustices? We do what we can to educate ourselves about the injustice - asking ourselves, what is the bigger picture here? Am I hearing the whole story? We support those who experience injustice and the organizations that work with them. We listen to the voices of the oppressed and hear their stories and needs.

This past few weeks we have been hearing about a [struggle](https://www.aptnnews.ca/national-news/the-facts-behind-mikmaw-fishing-rights/) in Nova Scotia between Acadian commercial fish harvesters and the Mi’kmaq First Nations. In 1999 the Supreme Court of Canada (SCOC) released the Marshall Decision. The court did not give the Mi’kmaq the right to fish – but recognized and upheld that right enshrined in the Treaties. The judges created the term Moderate Livelihood so the Mi’kmaq can make money, but not get rich. Thus, the Mi’kmaq have a constitutional right to fish for a Moderate Livelihood but Canada has yet to implement the Marshall Decision and DFO has not reflected the right to a Moderate Livelihood in its regulations. They also have not defined Moderate Livelihood. The commercial fish harvesters have raised concerns about conservation and overfishing the lobster stock and are upset about this off season harvesting. It is important to acknowledge the fears that they are experiencing and work to understand how they might feel their livelihood is being threatened. We also know or can learn how Indigenous folk have a strong tradition of conservation, committing to preserving the resources they need, and the government Department of Fisheries and Oceans have indicated that the lobster stocks are healthy and have doubled in the last 20 years. The commercial fish harvesters have such strong feelings that they took it upon themselves to attack and disrupt the Mi’kmaq fishers, ramming boats, taking traps, and stealing their catch. This week the attacks [escalated](https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/nova-scotia/mi-kmaw-lobster-fishery-unrest-1.5761468) when several hundred Acadian fishers and their supporters raided two facilities where the Mi’kmaq were storing their catch (along with stores from the commercial season). They set vehicles on fire, stole and destroyed lobster and damaged the facilities. The RCMP were called, took more than two hours to arrive and once they did, were reported to stand idly by, while the destruction took place. No arrests had been made. This weekend one of the fisheries was burned to the ground. The Mi’kmaq accuse the attackers and the RCMP of racism and say this is a hate crime. It could be called an example of white supremacy, where the majority commercial fishers do not recognize the indigenous rights of the Mi’kmaq, and the representatives of the government, the RCMP, the Department of Fisheries seem to be doing very little to address the problem. What do we do about how our taxes are spent and concern for the system we are a part of? What does giving back to God look like in this context? There are things we can do as we follow this story and be open to learning the wider context. APTN, the Aboriginal People’s Television Network, has good articles from an indigenous perspective. What do you think God would want from us in these circumstances?

We are in the midst of two elections. Giving to God the things that are God’s also means working for God’s Kingdom, God’s shalom community of love, peace, justice, kindness, and compassion. So it is important to vote and vote for candidates that support the values of God. As you consider candidates in your ridings, what are the important values of God that you would wish to see lived out through them? What issues and would you like them to work on, or actions you would like them to take that are in alignment with your understanding of God?

These are challenging issues and questions, and it can be easy to feel overwhelmed and inadequate. September 30, is Orange Shirt Day, which is about honouring the children who experienced residential school, both those who survived and those who didn’t. Jessica, our son Tyler’s fiancé, was preparing to make a presentation to the organization that looks after her autistic brother, and the YWCA where she works, about the impact of residential schools on her family. She wanted to share it with us, both to practice and to make sure it sounded ok. It was an honour for her to share this history and experience with us. She had a chart that outlined 6 generations of her family and the experiences they had, identifying things like residential school attendance and how it led to effects like domestic violence and alcoholism. One thing that was powerful was how she named that every generation had experienced being stolen children. Her parents and her and her siblings have experienced foster care. She was using this language of ‘stolen’ not only for those taken to residential school, but also for children who went into foster care because they still experienced not only being removed from their family but also from their culture. She identifies that she sees the foster care system as replacing residential schools because it is still teaching their children white culture and not honouring indigenous culture. Tyler was fostered and adopted by us, he is status. We have learned he is Metis status. So one of the profound pieces of this identification is that we are part of that system of fostering and adoption. We are like the Pharisees, caught in a system of injustice. We wanted to support a child who needed a home and may not have otherwise been adopted. Despite always wanting him to embrace and experience his culture, it wasn’t until he met Jessica that he finally began to honour all of who he is. Which really named that we didn’t have the resources we thought to make this possible for him. We, like the Pharisees are caught in two systems and we too need to figure out how to be faithful and challenge the structures that supported us. In her presentation Jessica also named her generation as the “take back the culture” generation. They are reclaiming and learning their culture. We celebrate that.

What ways can you give to God that which is Gods’? I invite you to take a moment to reflect with each other on the following questions or whatever is on your mind as you gather.

Questions:

Is there a time when you felt caught in being part of an injustice or an unjust system?

How do we balance being part of the system and challenging injustice?

What is a ‘kingdom’ issue you are looking for in the election candidates you want to support?

As we move through this time may we seek God’s guidance to know how to challenge the systems and structures to create a more just and generous world, giving to God, the love, compassion, kindness, and peace we are called to live.