

Exodus 33:12-23

Psalm 99

1 Thessalonians 1:1-10

Matthew 22:15-22

There are some very good reasons for putting our name on the things that belong to us. In a busy household with multiple children, it's a great way to keep the peace. Any argument about ownership can quickly be settled by looking to see whose name is on the article in question. People living in communal situations find it very useful to have their name on their things should the day ever come that the living arrangement will be dissolved and everyone moves on. Lost things are more likely to be returned if there's a name on them. "Who does it belong to?" becomes an easily answered question.

For the past several Sundays, we have been listening in on Matthew's descriptions of encounters that Jesus has been having with the power brokers of his day. They have been questioning his authority and he has been teaching them through parables about the nature of God, the vision of the kingdom of God, and the offensiveness of their own hypocrisy. He's telling the truth, but he isn't winning any converts among the powerful.

This morning's gospel lesson is no exception. The determination of the power brokers to get rid of this dangerous and disruptive Jesus has brought two powerful groups together who under normal circumstances are squared off against each other: the Pharisees and the Herodians. The Pharisees are the recognized leaders of the Jewish people chafing under the oppressive rule and occupation of the Roman Empire. The Herodians are following Herod Antipas who was appointed by Rome to be the ruler over the Jewish people. These two forces are locked in perpetual battle with one another, but on this particular occasion they have joined forces in the shared fear and hatred of Jesus of Nazareth.

They believe they have set up a lose/lose scenario for Jesus by asking him a question that cannot be answered without Jesus getting himself into trouble. They want to know if Jesus thinks it's lawful for Jews to pay taxes to Rome. If he says, "Yes" then he has aligned himself with the Herodians and has lost the support of the people in the crowds whose praise and loyalty keep Jesus from being harmed by the Pharisees. If he says, "No" then he is guilty of open rebellion against Rome and can be arrested and turned over to the Romans who will surely execute him for sedition. The Pharisees and the Herodians are pretty sure they have trapped Jesus.

But not so fast! As we already know, Jesus is as wise as a serpent and as innocent as a dove. He is impossible to corner or trap. He changes the nature of the question from political to philosophical and asks to see the coin used to pay the tax in question. It is a denarius ... a silver coin bearing the image of Caesar and declaring Caesar to be divine. To the Jews, the coin itself is offensive on multiple levels. After examining the coin, Jesus says simply, "Render unto Caesar that which belongs to Caesar and render under God that which belongs to God."

On the surface of things, it would seem that Jesus is dividing our civic responsibilities and our spiritual obligations. But let's look a little closer. Jesus is not asking us to compartmentalize our lives. The coin of the realm in first century Palestine bears the emblem of Caesar. It belongs to him. But what bears the image of God?

We do. We bear the image of God.

We are made in the likeness of God.

All that we are and all that we become and all that we have belongs to God. Everything.

Our bodies themselves belong to God. He fashioned each one of them before we were born.

Every thought that we have belongs to God.

Every dream we imagine for ourselves belongs to God.

Every word that we utter belongs to God.

Every decision that we make belongs to God.

Every move that we make is made through the grace of God.

The name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit was washed over us at baptism. And the sign of the cross of Jesus Christ was placed on our foreheads in oil when we were baptized.

At Confirmation, we stood before God and our families and our congregations and took vows of promise to God about our belief and our intentions.

We belong to God. God's name is all over us.

So, how do we render under God what belongs to God? *We* belong to God. All of each one of us belongs to God.

We give ourselves to God. We use the gifts that God has given us in service to God. We share the treasure that God has given us to further God's kingdom in the world. We give the time that God has allowed to us to meet the needs of others in God's world as best we can and in service to God.

This is the season of the year when we take our own personal inventory and make decisions about what and how much we will return to God in thanksgiving for all that God has given each one of us. It's harvest time and we faithfully bring the first fruits of our harvest to God. For each one of us that harvest is different. For each one of us the circumstances in which we live are different.

God knows us better than we know ourselves. Our hearts are open to God and from God we have no secrets. God knows the struggles we have with ourselves about the portion of what we will keep for our own use out of what God has given us and what portion we will return to God.

Our prayers these days are full of these questions. Our minds are contemplating what decision we should make. Our spiritual life is guided by our sense of trust in God and our willingness to open our hearts not only to God but to our Christian family at St. Paul's and the community that surrounds us.

We are charged by God to put God first ... to love God with our whole heart and to love those around us as strongly and with as much commitment as we love ourselves.

As we wrestle with this decision this year about what we will pledge to St. Paul's for the coming year we also wrestle with several questions: Do I really trust God to take care of my needs? How much giving on my part is enough and how much is too much? How do I best express my thanksgiving to God for all that God has done for me spiritually as well as physically?

Sharing our treasure isn't just about money. Sharing our treasure is also about sharing our time which is so precious, so fleeting and is not limitless. Sharing our time means being willing to spend time with each other whether it's at Fellowship Hour or a garden party to clean up the church grounds or a decoration day when we prepare the sanctuary for Christmas or for Easter. It is spending time in the community representing St. Paul's and letting people know that we are there because God sent us to see what we could do to share God's love with them. Sometimes it is spending time in meetings to make decisions about what's best for St. Paul's or how to do a better job of welcoming others to our church family.

And it's also about sharing our gifts. God has given each of us multiple gifts that we can and should share with each other and with God's people just outside our doors. The gifts we have are those things that we do well ... whether it's greeting someone with a smile on Sunday morning, or calling on someone who is sick, or writing a note to someone that we haven't seen for a while, or teaching others how a craft to make something they will enjoy, or teaching others about the love of God in this life right now, or serving at the altar to enrich our worship of God, or singing in the choir or the congregation to make a joyful noise to the Lord. All of us have gifts ... multiple gifts. They are those things that we enjoy doing and those things which we generally do fairly well.

Our ingathering will be next Sunday. It's the time we bring our portion of the harvest to God in thanksgiving and in honor. During this week ahead, continue your prayers about what you would like to pledge to St. Paul's for 2018 to continue the work of God in this place and at this time. Search your hearts which are already open and known to God. Have a conversation with God and remember to be still long enough to hear what God is saying to you.

Render unto God what belongs to God ... and that's all of each one of us. We are God's through and through. We are made in God's image. God's name is on each one of us. We belong to God.

Thanks be to God.

AMEN