

Matthew 22:15-22

Today's gospel reading completes the discussion Jesus had with the Chief priests and elders of the temple. He had told them three parables when they questioned his authority. They went off to plot how to get rid of him, and now the Pharisees and Herodians are challenging Jesus with a question about loyalty. My first thought upon reading this had nothing to do with loyalty, but my mind went to "Who are these Herodians?" There is no true record of them, but it is believed they were political leaders who favored the rule of King Herod Agrippa, the Roman appointed King of the Jews. They would be pleased if Jesus answered that it is proper to pay taxes to the emperor, if he answered in this way it would seem as though he favored the Roman rule, and that would pit him against the Jewish people. However, if he answered no, we aren't to pay the taxes, he would have Jewish loyalty, but he would be against the Roman rule which was a crime.

Jesus, knowing they were trying to trap him challenged them. He asked them to give him a coin. Notice, he doesn't have a coin, he has to ask for one. Looking at the silver coin with the emperor's likeness on one side and a declaration of his divinity on the other side Jesus asked them, "Who's likeness is on this coin?" They of course answer "the emperor" to which Jesus replied give to the emperor what is the emperor's but give to God the things that are God's. Note that Jesus didn't fault them for paying the tax, but he did call them hypocrites. They have forgotten who's they are and are wearing a false image.

Well, if the coin has the emperor's image on it to determine it belongs to the emperor, what has the image of God on it? The creation story in Genesis tells us we are made in the image of God. We are God's and all we have belongs to God. One preacher invited her congregation to mark their credit or debit card with an image of the cross to have them ask themselves whenever they used their card, "Is what I am purchasing matching my identity as a child of God?" It is a daunting thought to consider when you use your purchasing power to ask if you are helping to build God's kingdom.

Martin Luther considered this passage to be about two different authorities... those being civil authority and God's authority. He talks about two kinds of righteousness: civil righteousness and spiritual righteousness. Luther believed that we are to work on our civil righteousness and that we are accountable to how we act in society. But our spiritual righteousness regards our relationship with God and is determined by God's love in Christ. It isn't anything we can increase or earn.

We are citizens of the world and citizens of the kingdom of God. We owe taxes to our local, state, and federal government for the services they provide. We also must earn our civil righteousness by obeying the speed limits, and following other rules of the government, and the civil laws that are in place. Our employment, or the way we spend our time, is a part of our civil righteousness according to Luther. However, what is right to the world may not match our own sense of righteousness. It is then we are called to civil disobedience, or speaking out to what we see as inappropriate based on our citizenship in the kingdom of God.

There is an old story about a priest who was trying to teach his congregation a liturgical response to open the worship service. He decided that from now on, he would

open every worship service with the declaration: “The Lord be with you.” And he taught his congregation to respond: “And also with you.” He practiced it with them until it became natural for them. The next Sunday, as the priest stood in the pulpit and affixed his lapel mic to his robe, he offhandedly remarked, “There’s something wrong with this mic.” And his congregation responded with enthusiasm, “And also with you!”

We all want to know that the Lord is with us. That’s why we come to church or pray or read the Bible. We know that there is more to this world than what we experience through our five senses. We want to know that there is a Way, a Truth and a Life far beyond our daily life. We believe that we find ourselves and the meaning of our lives in knowing God. More than 1,600 years ago, Saint Augustine wrote, “You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in You.”

So why is it so easy to take God’s presence in our lives for granted? If we really believed that the Almighty God, the I AM, the Creator of the universe is always with us, listening to our prayers, closer than our very breath, wouldn’t we be overwhelmed with wonder and gratitude and joy? And yet, that’s not how we live, is it?

Let me ask you to consider an alternate scenario: what if you could have all the good things in life—the things that we in Christian circles refer to as “blessings”—but you didn’t have God? Would that be enough to make you happy? How long would it take you to notice the absence? What if you could have health and wealth and security and an easy life but you wouldn’t have the presence of God, or any relationship with God? What if God just left you alone?

I think we would still be searching for something to fill the void. We are designed with a desire to know our creator and until we build a relationship with God, we are constantly looking for more to satisfy that desire. And there is nothing more that we can do to become a member of the kingdom of God than to repent, confess our sins and build a relationship with God. We cannot earn God’s love. It is given to us through the grace of God because of Jesus Christ.

Position, authority, respect, those are things of the world that we do earn. If we are also followers of Christ, they are earned in a way that reflects our values; we live out our values. Just as Paul related to the people of Thessalonica “just as you know what kind of persons we proved to be among you for your sake. And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for in spite of persecution you received the word with joy inspired by the Holy Spirit, so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia. For the word of the Lord has sounded forth from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but in every place your faith in God has become known, so that we have no need to speak about it,” when we live out of our Christian values, we spread the gospel of the Lord everywhere we go.

We are to give to the world what is required of us; however, we are to be loyal to God before we are loyal to the world. God has given us all we need to love and serve God and one another. God has given us all we need to live out of our Christian values. And when we live out of our Christian values, we honor God.

All glory be to God.