

22 October 2023, 21 Pentecost (Proper 24A, Track 1)
St. John's Parish of Newtonville

Exodus 33:12-23

Psalm 99

1 Thessalonians 1:1-10

Matthew 22:15-22

The Things That Are God's

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Let us pray.

Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts beating as one be acceptable in your sight, O God, our Rock and our Redeemer, and set our hearts on fire with your love. Amen.

I am about to say a bad word. Politics. Now, don't walk out on me.

I used to love politics. Part of me always will. In college, I was a Government concentrator. That's Harvard-speak for a political science major. I participated in Harvard Model Congress as, among other things, Chair of the House Government Oversight Committee. I spent every summer interning in Washington, D.C. I even thought that one day I would run for office. However, politics has gotten quite ugly.

You may know that the House of Representatives is heading toward three weeks without a Speaker. And, without a Speaker, the House can't do

anything. There is a war raging in Gaza. There has been a war raging in Ukraine. There are many other wars and conflicts that don't make the news. As the contentiousness over the upcoming presidential election brews, there continues to be deep division over the last one.

Last week, I mentioned that, with the war in Gaza, a lot of energy is being invested into placing blame and picking sides like we're picking sports teams. We could say the same of politics more broadly. Don't get me wrong. There are significant issues that we should take positions on. The problem is that increasingly we choose our positions based on the team – the party or the candidate – we favor rather than the values that are important to us. We're too focused on our party winning and the other party losing. It's fine to align with a party, but our values – for us Christians, how God calls us to live and act – should be more important than our political affiliation.

Today's Gospel lesson is one of the most well-known biblical passages concerning how Christians should related to the government. The shorthand we typically use, drawn from the King James Version, is "Render unto Caesar." Often, this Gospel passage is reduced to a biblical sanction for the separation of church and state. But as with most things, context matters.

Let's go back to August 27, the Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost. That's when we heard the story of Peter, prompted by the Holy Spirit, confessing that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of the living God. That moment marks a pivot point in Matthew's Gospel and in our Gospel readings for this season.

After that, Jesus begins to teach in earnest that he will face torture and crucifixion, but death won't have the final word. After Peter's confession, Jesus' teachings start to take on a new urgency. Before his crucifixion, Jesus has to make sure his followers understand important lessons that will sustain them.

At the beginning of Chapter 21, it's Palm Sunday. Jesus enters Jerusalem triumphantly to shouts of "Hosanna!" Then he heads to the Temple, drives out merchants, overturns moneychangers' tables, heals the sick, and defends shouting children. The religious leaders weren't fans. They begin plotting to have Jesus arrested and killed.

So, they ask Jesus a series of gotcha questions. They are trying to get Jesus to say something that would either be sedition against the Roman Empire – which would cause the Romans to execute him – or blasphemy against the God – which would turn his followers against him and lead them to call for his death. Today's Gospel lesson has one of those gotcha questions.

Despite appearances, the Pharisees and Herodians aren't asking about taxation generally. They are asking about a specific tax: the census tax. This is a tax assessed on each person regardless of their income or wealth. If you live within the Roman Empire, you have to pay the tax. The amount for one person could be onerous. For a family, it could be crippling. If Jesus says not to pay the tax, he commits sedition. The Emperor wants his money, and he won't tolerate dissension. If Jesus says to pay the tax, then he risks turning his followers against him.

There is something else at play: the coin. The coin used to pay the tax, the denarius, doesn't just have the Emperor's face on it. Around the Emperor's face, is inscribed a bold claim: Tiberius Caesar Divi Augusti Filius Augustus – Caesar Augustus Tiberius, son of the Divine Augustus. The reverse side is inscribed "Pontifex Maximus": Highest Priest. The coin proclaims that the Emperor is a god, the son of a god, and the highest priest. Sound familiar? I seem to recall us referring to a poor Jewish man as the Son of God and our Great High Priest. The claims on this coin put Jesus in direct opposition to the Emperor.

Well, Jesus is hip to what's going on, and he deftly navigates this gotcha question. The scene is almost comical. "Show me the coin you use to pay

the tax,” Jesus says. I’m sure he knows what the coin looks like. Then, looking at the coin, he asks, “Whose face and title is this?” Again, he knows. When they respond that it is the Emperor’s, he tells them to give to the Emperor, then, what is the Emperor’s. I like to imagine Jesus being a little snarky and sassy here. “Well, if the Emperor is so into these little pieces of metal that he puts his face and title all over them, let him have his little pieces of metal.”

There is a second part to Jesus’ answer: “and to God the things that are God’s.” What are the things that are God’s? There is a neat parallelism here. The things that are the Emperor’s are marked with the Emperor’s image. Those are the things he values: little pieces of metal. The things that are God’s are, similarly, marked with God’s image. Hmm . . . What might be marked with God’s image? “So God created humans in [God’s] image, in the image of God [God] created them.”¹ Us. We belong to God. We are what God values.

God values so much more than little pieces of metal. We belong to God, and if we are to give to God the things that are God’s, then we are to give ourselves to God. This means loving one another and valuing one another

¹ Genesis 1:27.

as co-bearers of the image of God. This means living into the values of prayer and fellowship, repentance and reconciliation, proclaiming good news to the oppressed, seeking Christ in all persons, loving our neighbors as ourselves, striving for justice and peace, and respecting the dignity of every human being. This means cherishing the wondrous works of God and protecting the beauty and integrity of all creation – the creation that God loved into being and of which God made us, those who bear God's image, stewards.

We love to claim God for one party or candidate – and against the others. This is focusing too much on the coin. The coin, ultimately, belongs to God too, and it's not where God wants us focused. God is not registered with a political party. God hasn't endorsed a candidate. God is for all of us. God cares about what we do. Sure, what we do may align with a party platform, ideology, or candidate, but the point is that we should start with the values that matter, not the party, the ideology, or the candidate. It's not about the coin.

Give to the Emperor the things that are the Emperor's and to God the things that are God's. Everything and everyone is God's, and to give to God what is God's we need to stop taking positions because they are what our favorite party or candidate favors. We need to stop focusing on little pieces of metal.

We need to start focusing on seeing God's face in the people and the world around us. In taking positions, we need to start with the values that are important and ask if this position or that gives to God what is God's.

Amen.