

What Should We Give to God?

This morning's Gospel makes me feel sorry for the Temple authorities ... almost. Jesus has been strolling through the Temple, teaching the crowd without permission. When challenged, he refuses to reveal the source of his authority, then tells several parables that cast the Temple leaders in unflattering roles. Angry with Jesus but afraid of his followers, the authorities cook up a plot to entrap him. They lead off with clumsy flattery, then ask Jesus if it's lawful to pay taxes to the Roman emperor. 21st century Americans who live in healthy fear of the IRS would answer, "of course." But for Jesus and his contemporaries, this was a loaded question. Although Rome demanded taxes, the Hebrews hated paying tribute to their oppressors. If Jesus had chosen between the two options presented, he would have risked either being charged with treason by Pilate or angering his followers to the point where the Temple authorities could safely arrest him. But Jesus being Jesus, he easily sidesteps the trap that has been laid for him and throws in a spiritual lesson for good measure. The Temple authorities must have been livid. Just goes to show what happens when you try to get cute with the Son of God.

This episode is deeply embedded in our cultural gestalt. Even people who never go to church are familiar with the King James version of Jesus's words: "render unto Caesar that which is Caesar's," though they might not be so quick to add "and unto God that which is God's." But Jesus's answer raises another question. How can we tell which is which? The coin that his questioners handed to Jesus, a denarius, was engraved with the emperor's image in clear violation of the Law of Moses. That coin had no place in the Temple, and it was unquestionably Roman. In that sense, paying Roman taxes with Roman coins was just returning what already belonged to the Empire, and Jesus doesn't seem to have cared much about it either way. But it's an entirely different matter when we think about things that belong to God.

That denarius was a useful teaching tool because it was made in the image of the emperor. Humanity is made in the image of God, so guess whom we belong to? But it's not a perfect parallel. Money can be physically given to its recipient, whether it's dropped into somebody's palm or sent by credit card or Zelle. We can't exactly box ourselves up for shipment and, even if we could, there's no known mailing address for the Kingdom of Heaven. If we're going to obey Jesus and give ourselves to God, we have to figure out another way to do it.

Our passage from Exodus this morning offers a clue; let's put it in context. Moses has just been up on Mount Sinai, where he received the Ten Commandments, inscribed on two stone tablets by Adonai himself. While Moses was off communing with Adonai, the people got so anxious that Moses' own brother, Aaron, led them in making a golden idol so they'd have something to worship. Shocked by their idolatry, Moses smashed the tablets, broke up the festivities, and pulverized the idol before having about three thousand Israelites executed for blasphemy. Now, Moses has gone back up the mountain, and is conferring with Adonai about what to do with their wayward folk. They're both furious, but Moses reminds Adonai that the Israelites are still his chosen people. He begs to know God better. They ultimately agree that Adonai will stay with Moses and the Israelites, "stiff-necked" though they may be. Then, Adonai grants Moses' request to physically see him. Moses is extraordinarily brave to ask for this potentially lethal blessing, because one glimpse of Adonai's face could kill Moses on the spot. That danger is reinforced by what the text tells us. We translate God's name as "I AM," but the original Hebrew, אֲנִי־אֶהְיֶה (*ehyeh*), comes closer to "I Will Be Whatever I Will Be." Adonai is all-powerful. He answers to no one. He offers grace and shows mercy solely as he sees fit. He's so far beyond humanity as to be fundamentally unknowable. But Moses asks to know him anyway, and Adonai agrees to protect him so that he can catch at least a glimpse of the Divine glory.

Moses wins Adonai's favor because he sincerely wants to know him better. Read from cover to cover, the Bible tells the vast, complex, and epic story of God's struggles to build a relationship with humanity. From the moment that he blew the breath of life into a lump of mud, God has wanted us to love him, not out of terror or duty, but freely and with our whole hearts. Some of us get it right some of the time – Abraham, Moses, David, Peter, and Mary Magdelene come to mind. Mary loved God perfectly, but she had the advantage of being his mom. Most of us don't do it very well. Still, God keeps encouraging us, constantly experimenting with new ways to win us over without shattering our free will. And that's what I think is going on between Jesus and the Temple authorities in our Gospel passage today.

Jesus knew his time among us was growing short. Perhaps he hoped the Temple authorities would recognize him once they actually met. It's one of the many miracles to ponder about Jesus's embodied time on Earth. Adonai had to appear to the faithful from a whirlwind, because no one could see his unconcealed face and live. By incarnating as a mortal man, Jesus came to us as one of us, a god who understood what it is to be human. *He was a god that people could meet face to face.* That gave the Temple authorities, sworn servants of the Most High, the opportunity to talk with his Son. But they wasted that priceless time challenging his authority and trying to trip him up with word games. He must have been so disappointed. We can imagine him sighing as he said, "show me the coin used for the tax." Maybe he thought that a visual aid would help. It didn't do much for the Temple authorities. Perhaps it can do more for us.

This passage is often used during stewardship season to encourage people to pledge to the church. St. Luke's is in stewardship season now, and in a few minutes, we're going to ask you to give us your pledge cards so the Vestry can draw up a budget that lets us keep the church doors open. But I don't think Jesus was telling his listeners, or us, to pony up denarii for the emperor or

shekels for the Temple tax. I believe he was saying, as Pope Francis puts it, that “Christians are called to commit themselves concretely in earthly realities, but illuminating them with the light that comes from God.” Ideally, we give ourselves to God always and everywhere as we live our mortal lives. But this fallen world is far from ideal. That’s why we need to come to church.

C.S. Lewis correctly observed that the idea of “meeting” the God who is above, within, below and all around us is incomplete and misleading. God is so much more than we can ever be that we have to balance our humanized image with all kinds of metaphysical and theological abstractions. But abstractions, however praiseworthy, are impossible to love. We need to see Jesus, however we imagine him, with eyes we can look into, arms to embrace and, sometimes, shoulders to cry on. I can’t honestly blame the Temple authorities for squandering their time with him. I’m fully capable of making the same mistake, although it kills me that we can’t just walk in here and strike up a conversation with him the way they could. But, in giving us the gift of the church, Jesus has given us a place where we can still meet up with him. He has promised to be with us wherever two or more of us gather in his name. St. Luke’s is just such a place. Every Sunday morning, we gather in person and online in Jesus’s name to praise, worship, and give thanks to our God. That means Jesus is always with us when we gather. We just have to look for him, and the best place to find him is in the faces of one another.

This stewardship season, we’ve dreamed about the path before us and celebrated the dear people of our congregation. We’ve asked what the church is for. This week, we’ve gotten our answer. The church is the place where we come to meet Jesus. It’s the place where our love of God can grow until it spills out the front doors to bless our families, our friends, our neighbors, and all the beautiful, hurting world. And above all, it’s the place where we learn how to lovingly give ourselves to God so that, in giving, we receive everything we could ever need. *Amen.*