



St John the Divine, Maple Ridge October 22, 2017

Matthew 22:15-22

Then the Pharisees went and plotted to entrap him in what he said. So they sent their disciples to him, along with the Herodians, saying, “Teacher, we know that you are sincere, and teach the way of God in accordance with truth, and show deference to no one; for you do not regard people with partiality. Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?” But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, “Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites? Show me the coin used for the tax.” And they brought him a denarius. Then he said to them, “Whose head is this, and whose title?” They answered, “The emperor’s.” Then he said to them, “Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s.” When they heard this, they were amazed; and they left him and went away.

Finding answers to questions. The world appears to be fascinated with finding answers to questions. If, for instance, you go to Google and type in “questions and answers” some 137,000,000 links pop up in about a half a second. Many of these links contain advice for job seekers who want to have answers to those difficult questions that interviewers are sure to ask. Another group of links are all about answers to trivia questions and crossword puzzle clues. Finally, another host of websites provides answers to questions you or I might have about the Christian Faith—what, for instance is the role of the Bible in Christian faith? What is the right position for a Christian to take on social issues? And, of course, who is Jesus and what would Jesus think about this or that, what would Jesus do in this or that situation?

Answering questions. The world appears to be fascinated with answering questions. And, of course, we are too.

Interestingly enough, despite the host of websites that attempt to provide answers to questions, when it comes to Jesus in the Gospels, we find not someone who provides answers but instead someone who poses questions. Consider this: in the Gospels, Jesus is asked 183 questions.

In contrast to this, Jesus asks a total of 307 questions. But what is most striking is that of these 183 questions people ask Jesus, he answers only 3.

I'm talking about answers to questions this morning because questions and answers or non-answers are at the heart of our Gospel for today. That Gospel begins with Jesus being asked a straight up yes-or-no question, a question that is intended to box him in a bit—and it ends with Jesus taking actions and making a statement that poses a bigger and more provocative question to those in the story and to us who hear the story many years later.

As the story opens, (and here I'm using author David Lose's description of the passage) things are very, very tense. Just a week prior, Jesus had entered Jerusalem and had been greeted by adoring crowds. He then immediately entered the Temple and turned over the tables of the money-changers, challenging both political and religious leaders there. Religious leaders confront him about the authority behind his actions, and Jesus tells several parables once again calling their authority into question.

For all these reasons, two groups that normally have little to do with each other declare a temporary truce in order to work together to trap Jesus. These groups are the Herodians who are allied with the Roman occupiers, and the Pharisees who are aligned with the occupied, oppressed Jewish commoners.

The Herodians and the Pharisees, then, pose a question to Jesus that is meant to trap him. "Is it lawful," they ask, "to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?" Should Jesus answer in the affirmative, the crowds who hate the taxes would no longer adore him. And should Jesus answer negatively, the Romans who want the taxes will find his words treasonous.

But, as we now know, Jesus is not a yes-or-no kind of Saviour. Instead, he tells those asking the question to bring him a coin—the kind of coin someone would use to pay the taxes used by the Romans to lord it over the occupied Jews. "Whose image is on the coin?" Jesus then asks them. The image, of course, is the image of Emperor Tiberius Caesar, a man who claimed to be a god.

"Give to the emperor what is the emperor's and to God what is God's," Jesus says.

"Give to God what is God's."

And so here we are many years later, hearing this story, wondering about what Jesus' meant then and wondering what those words mean to us now. Here we are this morning musing and asking ourselves questions about immediate things--how will we spend the rest of our day today? What does next week hold for us? But under these questions about our more immediate life stand bigger questions, questions that you might call "life questions": What or who am I going to give my time, my energy and my money to? What values do I hold and how much will I express them in what I do? Who or what do I really love and what shape will that love take? Who or what guides me in this strange and beautiful and confusing world I find myself in today?

To these questions, to all these questions, Jesus does not give a straight answer, a simple way to resolve the questions. Instead he says to us "Give to God what is God's." "Give to God what is God's."

“But what belongs to God?” we have to ask. Does the realm of the Spirit belong to God and realm of politics, economics, and marketing belong to others? And what about us? Does the spiritual part of us or the church-connected part of us belong to God and the rest of us belong to our families, our employers, our political and social heroes and heroines?

You know where this is headed, right? It *all* belongs to God. Yes, though Jesus doesn’t say it, my guess would be that he believed that everything, all people, all discourse, all politics, all resources, all the past, all the present and all the future belongs to God. And so, the question is not really whether it is lawful to pay taxes to Caesar or not. The question is whether the totality of our lives reflects the fact that you and everything you have and everything you do belongs to God.

And so today—this very moment, this very church, the Church of St. John the Divine, these very people—the ones you adore and those you struggle with—it all belongs to God—and so let’s act like it does. This upcoming week—all the conversations we have, all the questions we seek to answer, all the choices we make about how to use our time, our energy and our money—they all belong to God—and so let’s conduct ourselves as if they do. And to go bigger still—in the town of Maple Ridge, in the province of British Columbia, in the country that is Canada, in the continent that is North America and on the planet that is Earth, all situations, even the stickiest ones, all people, even the problematic ones, all possibilities even those that seem remote and impossible, belong to God. And so let’s claim this, let’s cast our lives in this direction with all the God-given patience, perseverance, love, imagination and hope we can muster.

“Give to God what belongs to God.” To do this is a lifetime’s worth of work.

But today, what I want to leave you with is that you don’t have to think about the entire world or your entire lifetime. You only have to think about one situation that is troubling you or one person you are struggling with. You only have to think about one thing that has you in its clutches and say this to yourself: “This too belongs to God. This too is asking me to see God’s presence in it. This too is asking me to be God’s presence within it.” All we have to do is to do this one little thing. For this one little thing will lead to the next bigger thing and so on and so on until we dwell fully in the reality of a self and a world that lives within the embrace of our God because it all belongs to God.

I don’t know about you, but there are times I wish that Jesus would just give me a straight answer about something. But simple questions and equally simple answers is not the life he as prepared for us. “Give to God what is God’s” he says to us. It’s a lifetime’s worth of work that happens one small step at a time.