

“God’s Things” GPPC 10-15-17  
Psalm 99, Matthew 22:15-22

So you drag yourself out of bed on a Sunday morning. Swallow some breakfast. Rush around to get ready. Maybe you also have to get some kids ready too. You wriggle into your clothes and scrunch on your shoes. Drive to church. Tromp across the parking lot. Sit in the pew ready for some good news. And what does Jesus talk about? Taxes.

Jesus talks about taxes and we are not even close to April 15. Some things just are not fair. Benjamin Franklin told a friend, “In this world nothing can be said to be certain except death and taxes.” (quoted by David J. Lose in *Feasting on the Gospels, Matthew, Vol. 2*, 189.)

Old Ben was right about death and taxes being certain, wasn’t he? But there is another thing, a better thing, that is also certain. And Jesus tells us about it this morning.

Matthew says the Pharisees go and plot to entrap Jesus in his words, and they send their students, along with the Herodians to Jesus.

Pharisees and Herodians—this is a weird coming together of adversaries. As one scholar puts it, “The Herodians were a priestly group

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whose power base in Israel was founded largely on a set of alliances forged with the occupying Roman government. The Pharisees, by contrast, were a lay group within Judaism with a fervor to obey the law of Moses and to keep alive the zeal of the prophets. For the Pharisees, compromises with the pagan Romans would have been theologically unthinkable” (Thomas G. Long, *Matthew*, 250.) So we have the “go along to get along” Herodians paired with the “holding our noses in dealing with the Romans” Pharisees *together* ganging up to attack Jesus.

“Teacher,” they say, “We know you’re sincere, teach God’s ways truthfully, show deference to nobody, and treat others impartially.” It’s a slimy kiss of flattery they offer Jesus just before they reach around and slip the dagger into his back.

“So Jesus, tell us what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor or not?”

The trap is sprung. If Jesus says, “Don’t pay the taxes,” then he can be accused of treason against the Roman Empire. But if he says, “Pay the taxes,” then he will appear to sympathize with the hated, occupying Roman Empire and thus lose the support of some of his followers.

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As one professor put it, “One can hardly imagine a heavier demand: called upon to obey God, not simply in the face of political wrath but without the support of the community of faith. But it still happens.” (Fred B. Craddock, *Preaching the New Common Lectionary*, Year A, 242.)

This is no mere intellectual debate. Matthew says Jesus is aware of the would-be trappers’ malice. There is real evil in their question to Jesus, because they want to destroy him.

So Jesus gives a harsh response to their malice. “Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites? Show me the coin used for the tax,” So they bring him a denarius, a day’s wages for a laborer. And on the front of the denarius would be an image of the emperor with the inscription, “Tiberius Caesar, august son of the divine Augustus and high priest.” (Long, 250.) So the coin itself makes claims of divinity for the Roman emperor and family. Nothing like modest politicians, right?

“Whose head and title is on the coin?” asks Jesus. “The emperor’s” they answer. “Then,” says Jesus, “Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s.”

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And we are left with our own question to answer. “What belongs to the government and what belongs to God?”

In his “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” Martin Luther King, Jr. said, “I have been gravely disappointed with the white moderate. I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion that the Negro’s greatest stumbling block in his stride toward freedom is not ...the Ku Klux Klanner, but the white moderate, who is more devoted to ‘order’ than to justice; who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice...”

The sad irony of our time is to see the pattern repeated in Christians who fail to appreciate the gravity of the moment we are in. A time when life on our planet hangs in the balance as nuclear war is threatened by leaders who behave like petulant children; devastation wrought by climate change looms over us; and removal of health care insurance opportunity promises to bring misery and death to the most vulnerable among us. Yet instead of engaging the great moral issues of our day with the gospel of our Lord, too many Christians murmur, “Well, that’s being political.” But if Christ is Lord, (and Christ *is* Lord)

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Christ lays claim to all of our life, every sphere of our personal and corporate existence, including our politics.

We may pledge allegiance to the flag, but it is never our first allegiance. Our primary allegiance is to God revealed in Christ.

We may stand for the national anthem or we may kneel in protest, but one day that national anthem will no longer be sung. But in one way or another our eternal anthems, “Amazing Grace” and “Christ the Lord is Risen Today” will *always* be sung.

We may support the Republican Party or the Democratic Party or be Independents, but Christ is Lord over our politics. Christ is Lord claiming our ultimate loyalty in the policies we support and the leaders we choose to vote for.

So we will give to the government our taxes, and some of us will give military service or alternative service. We will offer our opinions and our votes. But our lives, our souls, and our final destination belong to God.

During part of my sabbatical this summer, Beth and I traveled to Chicago for the joyful birth of another grandchild. While we were there,

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word came that one of my retired preaching professors, someone who'd also taught Jo and her husband, was in town and had taken a terrible fall and possibly had a stroke. This man was internationally-known and the best teacher I'd ever had. He and I had been friends for about thirty years. Again and again I would call upon him for wise counsel, to speak when I was installed as a pastor at a church, to lead a workshop for a congregation, to critique something I'd written. Now he lay in a hospital bed across town at the University of Chicago Medical Center. Beth said, "You should go." I said, "The family is not going to want one of his old students hanging around." But she kept saying, "You should go."

So the next day I got an Uber and went to the hospital, and up to his room in ICU. He was not conscious and his wife was asleep in a chair. Quietly, so as not to wake her, I sat in a chair beside her. After a few minutes a nurse came in and asked, "Are you family?" "No, I'm just an old student." My professor's wife woke and we talked. Eventually, his sister arrived. I stayed maybe 40 minutes. Then I stood beside the bed and prayed for my old friend and mentor and his family. As I do so

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often, I asked God for healing and for strength. I gave thanks for my friend and his family and for the hospital staff. And then I left.

My friend died last week. And his funeral will be on Wednesday in the chapel of one of the schools where he taught. His family and friends mourn for someone we believe left too soon. But we do not mourn as people without hope. We mourn as people who know this dear and brilliant man is safe with God, and we shall meet again, because he never belonged to the emperor, and he never belonged to us either. He belonged to God.

We do not merely entrust ourselves to a good government or a bad one, to wise leaders or foolish ones. We do not entrust Jo to whatever Congress can dream up or whatever the fates may be. And we do not entrust our little ones and “all the little children of the world” merely to whatever services our government can muster and whatever clever plans we can concoct.

No. We entrust them all to the One to whom they belong. The One whose breath sustains us in this life and the next. The One from whose

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loving embrace we cannot fall. We entrust them all and we entrust ourselves to God, because we belong to God. We belong to God.

Tell the Pharisees. Tell the Herodians. And tell the world the good news. We belong to God. Amen. ©Jeff Paschal