

Heart to Give
Meditation on Matthew 22:15-22
Oct. 22, 2017
Merritt Island Presbyterian Church

15 Then the Pharisees went and plotted to entrap him in what he said.¹⁶So 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. ¹⁷Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?' ¹⁸But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, 'Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites? ¹⁹Show me the coin used for the tax.' And they brought him a denarius. ²⁰Then he said to them, 'Whose head is this, and whose title?' ²¹They 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.'²²When they heard this, they were amazed; and they left him and went away.

Mary was the kind of person who greeted you with a hug. Always smiling, laughing, talking, moving around. She was small, maybe 5 feet tall. Her husband, Chuck, looked like a giant next to her. Her size and personality fit perfectly with her career choice. Mary was a teacher of young children. She didn't want to be anything else. She wanted to be a teacher ever since she was a little girl. She was born Oct. 31, 1934 in Bronx, NY, to Irish immigrants. Her parents, Margaret and Daniel, were charter members of Eastchester Presbyterian Church in the Bronx . Daniel was superintendent of the Sunday school for 25 years. His two children never missed church or Sunday school.

Mary first got to practice her teaching skills on her little brother, Jim, who was 10 years younger, though she may not have always wanted him around. Her mother took Mary to piano lessons at a woman's home. After the lesson, Mary and her mother walked home, leaving Jim, asleep in his baby carriage, in the woman's backyard. The piano teacher called when they got home to say, "Come get your baby." Mary knew they had left him--and didn't say anything.

Yes, Jim was kind of a nuisance to Mary, especially as he got older. She always said he put his pet turtle in her bed. Jim swears that he doesn't know how the turtle got in her bed. That's the story, and he's sticking to it. Then, one day, Jim came home from the pet store with a hamster. Mary paid Jim for the hamster and marched him back to the pet store to give the hamster back. She probably thought the hamster would end up in her bed, too. It probably would.

Then there was the business about the chair. Both Jim and Mary claimed ownership of this little white, antique chair. When Jim and I got married 12 years ago, he had the chair. I suggested, since we weren't using the chair, that we repaint the chair and give it to her as a present. But she didn't really want the chair back. She wanted Jim to acknowledge that the chair belonged to her all along. He didn't. The argument continued.

Mary earned a bachelor's degree from New Paltz State Teachers' College in New Paltz, NY, in 1956. She taught kindergarten in Larchmont Avenue School in Mamaroneck, NY, for about 10 years,

marrying Chuck in 1958. She had met Chuck through a church youth group. When Chuck got a job working for IBM in Poughkeepsie, they moved to Hopewell Junction. She taught kindergarten in an historic, one-room schoolhouse because the Wappingers Central School District was overcrowded. They moved to Pelham Manor, NY, in 1970, after the birth of their second son, Kenny, in 1969. Mary was a teacher, then director, of the First Presbyterian Church of New Rochelle's preschool until 1998. At 64, she became a permanent sub for Willmot Ave. School, showing up every morning, prepared to work wherever the principal sent her.

Why would she retire? She asked Jim and me on one of our visits to NY. What would she do? She continued to work, though she had pain in her back, knees and hips, especially when she climbed up and down stairs. She didn't want to travel. She never went on a cruise. She got on an airplane once to go to Ireland to visit her relatives, but after that, didn't want to get on an airplane again. She took the auto train once to Florida. She and Chuck came to our wedding in York, PA. They came to my graduation from Princeton Seminary. They always traveled by car--and couldn't wait to get home. She didn't care about what she wore, didn't wear makeup, didn't worry about remodeling their old home, which didn't have air conditioning. Mary gave of herself--all that she had, all that she was, for the passion God had put inside her to care for children. She had a heart to give.

Our gospel lesson today, on the surface, seems to be about money and the question of paying taxes. But it's also about loyalty and obedience. The Pharisees and the Herodians, two political groups within Judaism, play an important role in the passage; they don't usually get along, but they share a common enemy-- Jesus, who is questioning the status quo, stirring the oppressed to hope for change, performing miracles, and criticizing the wealthy and arrogant religious leaders. The Pharisees want independence from Rome; some advocate armed revolt; others don't want bloodshed and favor a "live and let live policy." The Herodians are supporters of Rome and act in its interests, hoping for the restoration of the Herodian dynasty, which owed its power to Rome.

The Pharisees send their "disciples" to question Jesus. Isn't that a curious thing? Perhaps it makes the encounter seem more innocent-- students learning from the "teacher," as they call Jesus, trying to manipulate him with flattery, get him to let down his guard. He is "sincere," they say. He teaches "the way of God in accordance with truth" and shows "deference to no one; for you do not regard people with partiality."

Jesus isn't fooled. He knows their malice, he says in 22:18. As 1 Samuel 16:7 says, "God sees not as people see, for people look at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart." Before this passage, in Matthew 21:45-46, the chief priests and Pharisees want to arrest Jesus when he says their kingdom will be taken away from them and given to a people "that produces the fruits of the kingdom." But they fear the crowds that believe Jesus is a prophet.

Jesus will be in trouble whether he answers yes, it is right to pay the tax or no, it isn't. If no, he will be accused of sedition. If yes, he sets aside the law of God. Jesus asks to "see" the coin used to pay the poll tax. "Show me," he says, for this is an object lesson. The poll tax is a "direct tax levied on every adult Jew (including women and slaves). But Jesus and his disciples don't have this coin. The Herodians or the Pharisees' disciples bring him the coin, and the fact that they have it, confirms they are "hypocrites," as Jesus calls them; carrying and using the emperor's money, which they want Jesus to say is a violation of the Torah. The coin asserts Rome is "favored of the gods," bears the image of Rome's emperor, proclaims him to be son of the "divine, high priest Augustus." The coins are "instruments of propaganda," reminders "of the emperor's political power." They symbolize "defeat and humiliation" for the Jewish people.

Jesus amazes everyone with an answer as tricky as the question. He says, "give" or "give back," which more closely reflects the verb's meaning, "give back, therefore, to the emperor the things that are the emperor's" (the coin with the emperor's image) "and to God the things that are God's."

He doesn't advocate civil disobedience or armed revolt, disappointing some. What belongs to the emperor is simply the tax, the payment for benefits received from the imperial government. The Pharisees and Herodians have already acknowledged this government's legitimacy by carrying and using the emperor's money. But that's all the emperor is due.

What, then, belongs to God? The psalmist joyfully sings in 24:1, “the whole earth is the Lord’s and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it.” WE belong to God, but so does every person of every nation, in every time and place. This is the world God so loves, the one into which God sent His Son to save those who were perishing in their sins and give them eternal life with Him.

My sister in law, Mary Crawford Amann, will be 83 on Oct. 31. This year has been especially hard. Chuck died in February. Her family moved her to an assisted living facility and hired a caregiver to stay with her. She is too vulnerable on her own. Mary suffers from a form of dementia, a disease that steals your loved one, bit by bit. She remembers some things from long ago, but can’t recall words that have just been said. She still knows and loves her baby brother, Jim. And she always asks about me, he says, and my church, when he calls. She says she is sad because we live so far away.

Like Mary, God gave me a passion for ministry to children and young families. But I have discovered also a desire to encourage and help equip our preschool teachers. For they have a very demanding and important yet undervalued job-- touching the lives of young children for good. I know Mary would approve that Jim and I would like to give money to start a scholarship fund in Mary’s name here at MIPC to help our teachers of young children pay for continuing education. Many of our preschool teachers live paycheck to paycheck and also have families to support. It is a hardship for them to pay for professional development

that is essential to effectively meet the needs of children in today's rapidly changing world. They would all profit from networking with other teachers and learning about the latest developments in educational research and best methods for teaching children, particularly those with special needs. You might like to help the teachers, too, or perhaps start a memorial scholarship fund for families struggling to pay for childcare while they work. Perhaps God has given you a passion for another ministry opportunity at MIPC. I invite you to start something new, if you see a need. Follow your passion. The important thing is that you actively participate in ministry, obeying Christ's command to offer to God the things that belong to God.

You are God's own! All that you are, all that you have, all that you will become are gifts from God to use for Him. So that leaves only one lingering question.

Do you have a heart to give?

Let us pray. Holy One, we thank you for your many gifts to us, pouring your Spirit into our hearts, transforming them so that you may use us for your loving purposes. Help us, Lord, to be more generous, obeying you by sharing the blessings of time, talent, and resources, including money, to build up your Kingdom right here in this community. We pray for the teachers of young children and the families who have entrusted the children to us to nurture in the faith. We pray for Mary, Lord, that you would touch her and heal what is broken in her. Give her peace and joy. Comfort her in her grief. Give us all, Lord, hearts to give so that we may change the world. In Christ we pray. Amen.