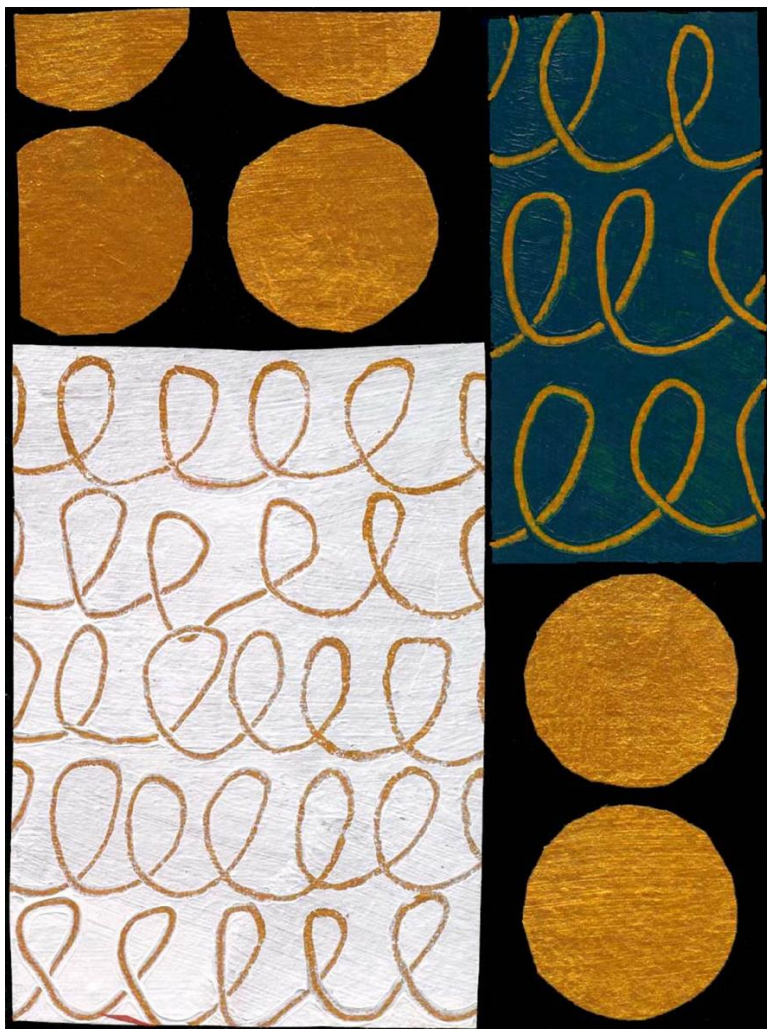




It's All God's

Preached by Ruling Elder, Jeff Drees at FPC October 18, 2026

21st Sunday after Pentecost

Psalms 96:1-9; Matthew 22:15-22

You gotta love Jesus! Well, of course you have to love Jesus—I mean if you're a believer—if you know him as the Christ who entered the world to set things right—of course, you love Jesus. But I am not talking about Jesus, the Divine Son of God. I am talking about Jesus, the human, Jesus the person. Without a doubt, he is an extraordinary man. He loves boldly and shows kindness at every opportunity. He is angered when the poor and downtrodden are mistreated. He is compassionate toward children and others whom society disregards. He is a sage—wise beyond his years.

Some would argue, however, that a study of Jesus as a man would not be complete without considering his sense of humor. Yes, Jesus has a sense of humor. There is too much evidence to

believe otherwise. Think about it: Much of Jesus' life is about joy. At the wedding in Cana, he turns water into wine—to help the family save face—but also to ensure that everyone has a good time. One writer notes, “The Gospels reveal Jesus as a man with a palpable sense of joy and even playfulness. You can catch glimpses of this in His interactions with the men, women and children of His time as well as in many of the parables.”ⁱ

While Jesus is a joyful man and a good friend—he is also a man of great intelligence—whose brilliance never shines brighter than when he is outsmarting his opponents. And in today's gospel reading, his opponents come in a most unusual pairing—Pharisees and Herodians. The Herodians, as their name suggests, are Jewish allies of Herod Antipas—so they support paying of taxes to Caesar. The Pharisees, on the other hand, are committed to the Jewish law down to the letter—so they oppose paying taxes to Caesar on religious grounds.ⁱⁱ Despite their differences, however, there stand Pharisees and Herodians—those who favor Rome and those who do not—united against a common cause—Jesus—and armed with a highly charged political question.

But first, they lay the groundwork, attempting to put Jesus off-guard—pretending they are something they are not. “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?”

Jesus was not born yesterday. He sees straight through them—straight to their heart and soul. Not one to mince words, Jesus responds, “Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites?” Isn't it peculiar how these pretenders, bent on trapping Jesus, speak the truth even in their ignorance? Jesus **is** sincere. Jesus **does** teach the way of God in accordance with the truth and Jesus **shows** no partiality.

“Show me the coin used for the tax,” Jesus says. And there in broad daylight, they hand over a coin. On one side, there's an image of the emperor—and on the other, words claiming the emperor's *divinity*. Therefore, what these religious leaders hand Jesus is nothing less than a graven image, banned in the commandment, “You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I the Lord your God am a jealous God...” Even though, the Pharisees are opposed to having in their possession any sort of graven image, *someone* has a coin in his pocket!

At this point, I imagine you can hear a pin drop. Will Jesus take the bait? If Jesus answers no, he is in trouble with the Roman authorities, and a quick trip to Pilate will set things straight. If Jesus answers yes, he is in trouble with many of his own followers. He is between a rock and a hard place, but with Jesus, that's when things really get interesting. Looking at the coin, Jesus calmly inquires, “Whose head is this and whose title?”

“The emperor’s.”

By now, the disciples of Jesus may be feeling a little nervous. The Pharisees and Herodians are filled with anticipation, surely thinking, “We’ve got him now. He’ll never get out of this one.” They couldn’t be more wrong because in the blink of an eye, the tables turn, when Jesus says to them, “Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperors, and to God the things that are Gods.” With a simple coin and a simple sentence, Jesus avoids the trap of the Pharisees and the Herodians, but he does more than that. For if we have eyes to see and ears to hear, we will see that there are other layers of meaning tucked into his response.

In 1st Century Palestine, the denarius represents the dictating powers of Rome and their annual taxation, which is administered by the Jewish authorities. In his response, Jesus *allows room* for Caesar, for the emperor, for governing bodies. But that is not the end of the story because he adds, “and to God the things that are God’s.” Nothing could be clearer. “The earth is the lords and the fullness thereof, the world and they that dwell therein.” All things belong to God. The realm of politics is also subservient to God so the emperor, the king, the governor, the president — they hold no power other than what is on loan to them.

Then there is the issue of money itself. It is something about which Jesus holds strong opinions. In fact, it has been said that Jesus teaches more about money than any other topic. You remember his admonition, “Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven...for where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”ⁱⁱⁱⁱ At the end of the day, the things in heaven and the things on the earth—it’s all God’s. All of creation! Nothing we own is truly ours—it is all on loan, which begs the question, “How well are we taking care of God’s possessions?”

And if we are talking about what belongs to God, we must include ourselves for in Genesis 1:27 we read, “So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.” We are made in God’s image, and baptism marks us as God’s very own. We are God’s currency. How, then, are we spending ourselves on God’s behalf?

While Jesus is surely wise, witty, and wonderful, he is also brave beyond measure. He is not afraid that if he fails to play the games of the world, he might lose his status. He does not care if people criticize him. Even the religious rulers, who think they hold all the power, fail to intimidate Jesus. Why? Because from the day of his baptism, when Jesus is anointed by God’s Spirit, he becomes a man on a mission. From that moment, nothing deters him from doing the will of his Abba Father. An inner awareness of who he is and whose he is shapes Jesus’ interactions with everyone he meets—even those who oppose him—even those who will, ultimately, crucify him.

It is an honor and a joy to be a follower of Christ. Day by day, may we yearn to be more like him. In his earthly ministry, Jesus demonstrates radical hospitality and generosity. Jesus gives of his time—even when the crowds are so thick, he has to get into a boat to teach them. Jesus gives of his talents—a healer, a sage, a teacher, a multiplier of fish and bread. And Jesus gives of his treasures—not the emperor’s coin, but something of infinitely greater value. Jesus gives himself. His time, his gifts, his compassion, his very life—all offered in service to God and to God’s people.

Indeed, are God’s currency. We are not our own. Our lives, our gifts, our resources, our time, our very selves are gifts entrusted to us for a purpose. So, the question Jesus leaves with us is not simply, “What belongs to Caesar?” but “What belongs to God?” And the answer is: **everything**. It’s all God’s. Amen.

ⁱ James Martin, S.J. @<http://www.relevantmagazine.com/god/deeper-walk/features/28558-jesus-was-funnier-than-we-think>

ⁱⁱ Feasting on the Word, 191.

ⁱⁱⁱ Matt. 6:19-21

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