

“Give God What Is God’s”
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana
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Matthew 22: 15-22

So we are now getting into the nitty-gritty of making a college decision. Erin and I made a visit to Davidson College this past week, and it went very well. Also this week, we began the process of filling out the FAFSA, or Free Application for Federal Student Aid. It’s something every family has to do when a child is applying to college, to help evaluate potential forms of federal, state, and financial aid from the university or college. Or course, to complete this application, we have to provide our tax returns from last year. So much of my week was not only spent visiting my alma mater with my daughter, but also reliving my taxes from this past year, and seeing how all of this is going to play out!

Taxes. They aren’t our favorite thing to talk about. And when we first start out in the work force, taxes can be an unpleasant surprise. One of our favorite shows from twenty years ago was “Friends,” and thanks to Netflix, our girls now have gotten hooked on that show, too. In the first season, one of the characters, Rachel, starts a new job and she’s so excited when she gets her first paycheck. But when she opens it and sees how much less it is than she expected, she asks, “Who’s FICA?” And that’s when adulthood truly begins!

The reality is that taxes are a necessary part of our life as citizens of the United States – or of any other civilized nation. They are necessary to raise funds for public schools, maintenance of roads and highways, police and fire protection, and many, many other public services we depend on as a society. Taxes are a way for individuals to contribute funds which add to the welfare of the whole. The negativity which is often associated with taxes comes when those funds are used in inappropriate or wasteful ways. The American public deserves the best use of the funds we give on a local, state, and national level through our taxes. When we see waste, corruption, or ineffective use of public funds, our view of taxes becomes drastically negative, and we demand better appropriation and use of our hard-earned dollars.

Taxes, money, uncertainty, greed – these are just a few of the words and emotions which can consume us as Americans. It seems appropriate, then, that the lectionary text for today is this story from Matthew. Commonly referred to as the “Render unto Caesar what is Caesar’s” story, at its heart is Jesus’ insistence on what it means to be his disciple. It’s not just a clever riddle meant to throw the Pharisees – and us – off our routine. It’s a reminder that in the end, nothing we have belongs to us, Caesar, or any earthly entity; in the end, all that we have belongs to God alone.

To begin, this story from Matthew starts in an ironic way. We read that the Pharisees “went and plotted to entrap (Jesus) in what he said” (22:15). Their intention was to get him to say something incriminating which would make him

threatening to the Roman authorities, thus leading to his arrest. Their intent was deceitful, to say the least. And yet, their disciples begin by saying to Jesus, "Teacher, we know that you are sincere, and teach the way of God in accordance with truth . . ." (22:16). They complement Jesus for being truthful and sincere, while their intentions toward him are anything but truthful and sincere.

And Jesus knows their intent, the purpose behind their confrontation with him: "Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites?" Debie Thomas writes: *The Pharisees and the Herodians attempt to entrap Jesus with a clever question: "Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?" The Pharisees see the tribute tax as a heretical and antinationalist capitulation to a pagan emperor, while the Herodians see refusing to pay the tax as sedition. Answering this yes-no question is a lose-lose proposition.*

Instead, Jesus takes a Roman coin – a coin that honors the emperor as a deity – and offers his ambiguous both-and answer: "Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's." How typical of Jesus – not only to respond to a challenge with an even greater challenge, but to insist that the relationship between faith and politics is too complex to reduce to platitudes or tweets.

It's important to note what Jesus does not say. He doesn't say that there are two distinct realms, the religious and the secular, and that they require our equal fidelity. What he says is more complicated: the coin is already the emperor's – there's his face stamped right on it – so give it to him. And then consider the harder question: What belongs to God? What kind of tribute do you own him? (Christian Century, September 27, 2017, 21).

Jesus was not going to be tricked. He makes it clear whose authority he is under, and lets the inquisitors wrestle with whose authority they ultimately will answer to. If Caesar's image is stamped on the coin, then give to Caesar what is his.

But of course, that begs the question: how do we know what is rightfully God's? Perhaps those things on which God's image is stamped? Brian Stoffregen writes: *What are we to give to God? The things stamped with God's image – us! We are to give God ourselves – our whole selves – not just some part.*

Some may give God their minds, but have hearts far from God. Some may give God their hearts, but are unwilling to learn from God in the Word. Some may give God their muscles, but are unwilling to bring their bodies to worship or education classes. Many give God 1 or 2 hours a week, but God wants all 168 hours a week. Many give God 2% of their income, perhaps think about 10% but God wants 100%.

We cannot say that "this part belongs to God, so I will give it to God." Everything we are and everything we have belongs to God. Everything we are and everything we have we are to give (back) to God. We are but mere managers or stewards of these gifts God has given to us (Brian Stoffregen Exegetical Notes, Proper 24A – Year A, www.crossmarks.com).

“Everything we are and everything we have belongs to God.” When we are invited to serve in God’s name, we are not called to give a portion of ourselves. When we are asked to lead in God’s name, we are not called to offer excuses. When we are approached during the week with an opportunity to show Christian love to a stranger, we are not called to withhold that love since it is not on a Sunday. God’s image is emblazoned on each and every one of us. As such, we are to offer back to God all of our heart, mind, soul, and being, and not withhold anything as disciples of Jesus Christ.

Our ultimate allegiance is not to the government, to our finances, to our retirement funds, to our possessions, to taxes – our ultimate allegiance as Christians is to none of those things. Our ultimate allegiance is to God – the one who loved the world that he came in human form to reinforce the image of himself in our hearts, minds and souls. Does that mean we are called as Christians to withhold our taxes, withhold our participation in society, and live in isolation? Far from it. Our role is to be active, supporting members of the culture so that it might reflect God’s justice and righteousness.

But consider this reflection of Stoffregen again: *Many years ago I attended a workshop on stewardship. The presenter made a comment that has stuck with me. He stated that he always makes it a point to give more to his church through his offerings than he gives to the government through his taxes. That was a way he could indicate the place of his greater allegiance – who has the greater authority over him. I’m not suggesting this as a new law, but I think that we all need to struggle with how we apply God’s authority over us, which is to be greater than the state’s authority. We need to struggle with giving our whole selves to God – doing what God would have us do – in our everyday lives, which include death and taxes (ibid).*

Where does your allegiance lie? Are you bound by the lifestyle you are leading? Is your identity forged in the cars you drive, the newest gadget you wish to buy, the activities your children are engaged in, the next vacation you are looking forward to? Are you giving your whole self to God, or just a portion? Who has authority over you – God or your money?

This past week, you received your stewardship mailing from the church, telling you the story of how this congregation has made choices about its allegiance to God over many, many years through its financial, talent, and time commitments. Next Sunday, we are all invited to come to this table, and place before God our pledges of commitment for 2018. And in so doing, we are called to give our whole selves in allegiance to the one whose image is imprinted on us.

(Taking out a dollar bill) Perhaps our own US currency needs to be our personal reminder every time we pay for something. It’s true, we do not have the image of an emperor or monarch on our currency, implying we ought to worship an individual leader. But we do have a simple phrase that reminds us that this currency is not where we place our ultimate allegiance. That phrase? “In God we trust.”

Thanks be to God. Amen.