

A sermon delivered by the Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, senior minister at the First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, October 16, 2011, Pentecost 17, dedicated to all the members of First Church running in the Columbus Marathon, to all who “run the race of faith with perseverance,” and always to the glory of God!

“Give to God”

Isaiah 45: 1-7; Matthew 22:15-22

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

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Matthew 22:15 begins with the entrapment of Jesus. He is cornered by an act of deliberate collusion by two groups who hate each other and can't stand him. The two groups are the Pharisees and the Herodians.

The Pharisees resist the Roman Empire. They are zealous adherents of the Jewish law. In their determination to bring about perfect compliance to the law, they are particularly disturbed by any movements or leaders advocating anything less than the strict interpretation they espouse. Jesus, in their eyes, is such a leader. Think in our terms today of orthodox people of any faith - like the most conservative members of the religious right in America.

On the other hand, the Herodians benefit from the Roman Empire. Unlike the strongly anti-Roman Pharisees, the Herodians gain their name as supporters of Herod Antipas, the puppet king installed by Rome in the area around Galilee. They are largely opportunists who attempt to attach themselves to the person in power and so win military favor

and financial reward. In today's terms, think of anyone in America today who benefits financially from our military-industrial complex.

Both groups are challenged by Jesus and his message of non-violent resistance and love for God and one another.

It is their common love for power that brings together these two disparate political/religious groups. They will (begrudgingly) work hand-in-hand to discredit Jesus, trying to pin him into making politically incorrect statements about the Caesar - the emperor of Rome - and/or the leaders of the Jewish movement in Jerusalem.

And so, the question to trip Jesus up, well thought out and no doubt well rehearsed, begins: "*Teacher, we know that you are honest . . .*" You and I know that the most important moments in anyone's life comes right after you have been complimented by someone in power. Integrity melts in such moments. The question is: Will they lure Jesus into their traps through their compliment?

They continue, "*. . . and that you teach the truth about God's will without worrying about what people think, because you pay no attention to a person's status.*" Another translation has it, "*You do not look into anyone's face.*" In other words, "*We know no one can trap you or outsmart you (Except us).*" It reminds me of the time when I (a suburban kid from the East) was visiting my cousins here in Tuscarawas County, Ohio, and they sent me into a field to pick flowers . . . with a bull. They told me even though he was large, he was harmless. Unlike Jesus, I took the bait. Fortunately I escaped in one piece as he was charging me (with flowers in hand). Now you've got to believe these folks wished Jesus to be bludgeoned by the bull called Caesar! Even before they got to the big trap of money and power, they were trying to corner him.

And here comes the big trap:

"Tell us, then, what do you think? Is it against our law to pay taxes to the Roman emperor or not?" This question is indeed cleverly worded and seeks to put Jesus into a bind so that no matter how he responds, he loses.

If he answers "no" to the question of paying the tax, the Romans will get wind of it and accuse him of sedition. Advocating such blatant disobedience can't be tolerated and he will be immediately arrested.

If he said "Yes, pay the tax," then the Pharisees can portray him as a traitor to his faith. Will saying "yes" to paying taxes not affirm the claim that the emperor is indeed regarded as a god?

And so here we have a clever question leading into a foolproof trap. There appears to be no way that the response won't condemn Jesus. Even if he attempts to avoid controversy by not answering the question, his credibility will be seriously damaged with the people. They have him in a bind, and they know it; so much so that a certain amount of smugness can hardly be missed in their presentation of the question.

It is, you see, not so much a question of paying taxes; though, outwardly that is the subject. The real question here is a matter of allegiance: who has the power and to whom is one's loyalty owed?

Come on Jesus, *"Tell us, then, what do you think? Is it against our Law to pay taxes to the Roman Emperor or not?"*

Calmly Jesus responds, *"Show me the coin for paying the tax."* They bring him the coin, and he asks: *"Whose face and name are these?"* *"The emperor's,"* they answer. So Jesus says to them, *"Well, then, pay to the emperor what belongs to the*

emperor, and pay to God what belongs to God."

This is really quite an extraordinary reply.

First, his answer completely turns the tables on the questioners. You can almost see the arrogant, self-assured smirks drop on their faces. They were totally confident that they had Jesus trapped. They had planned for hours and rehearsed with each other the question that would trap him. They had their headline news for *The Galilean Times* - "Jesus Turns on Rome" or "Jesus Rejects Jewish Leaders." There would be no way he could slide out of the trap they had concocted. And yet, he comes up with such a perfect response that, as the account continues, *"When they heard it they were amazed; and they left him and went away."* What else could they do in that situation? Their amazement was perhaps not so much with the answer itself, but that they had allowed themselves to be outsmarted. Jesus' response left them without anything they could say. How ironic is this reversal of circumstances!?

Most of us aren't vengeful people, but I don't think that we're unhappy to see folks who are wrapped up in power and benefit financially and/or politically from their power surge get what they deserve. So there's a sense of justice in this story that we like. But the real importance here is not the cleverness of the answer, not Jesus one-upping the opposition, but the truth to which he points.

The question, as posed, asks ultimately, **"Who has a claim upon my life?" Is it the government who has a claim? Is it my family? My job? Could it be my ambitions or personal fulfillment? Is it God? Which one claims me? To whom do I owe my loyalty . . . my `all in all?'"**

Surprisingly, perhaps, Jesus replies that they all have claims upon us - the government, job, family, God. The

challenge for each of us is how to sort out all those allegiances so that they are kept in perspective and given their proper place.

In the play *You Can't Take It with You*, Grandpa Vanderhof is visited by an Internal Revenue Service agent. The agent asks grandpa why he hasn't paid any income tax for the last 22 years. To which the old man replies, "*I didn't figure I owed the government anything!*"

Of course, he does and we all do. Despite our consternation with how the government operates - especially when tax breaks for wealthiest are not present for those in the middle or the bottom income levels or when so many levels of government seem to be working against one another, and thus against the common good - even so, we realize that life without some governing structures would be nothing short of chaos. So we owe our nation something. Our country does have a rightful claim upon us. But that claim should never lead us to a blind obedience to whatever we are told. In our democracy, we are allowed - even encouraged by many varying voices - to change policies or politicians.

Similarly, our employer has a legitimate claim upon us; after all we are being paid to do a certain job. Does that mean, however, that we should leave our ethics and moral values at the business door either for our personal advancement or because the company encourages us to do so?

Surely our families have a natural claim upon us. They should. We ought to take those basic responsibilities very seriously. And yet, even here, we can find times when the need of a friend or neighbor's need takes precedence over those more immediate to us.

Even after we have sorted out government, job, and family - what about God? Where does our loyalty and

response to God fit in to this complexity? What do we give to God? Do we give the final little pieces that are left of us after government, our workplace; our families extract their parts of our lives?

What does Jesus say? He says, "*Give to the emperor what belongs to the emperor. **Give to God** what belongs to God.*"

The question as posed asked about allegiance: who has the power and to whom is one's ultimate loyalty owed? But, what Jesus tells the questioners is to go and give the emperor the coin, for his likeness is upon it. "*Give him back what is his.*" Ultimately, Caesar's place in your life has but a small claim upon you, almost insignificant.

Instead, consider what you owe to the one who has created you and given you life itself. You have been created by God in God's image. God has made you beautiful! So return your thanks and your gratitude to God in response to your gratefulness for what God has done for you.

I heard one of my Christian colleagues – a good Baptist preacher and friend - say the other day, "God doesn't want a tithe from us! God doesn't want 10%! God wants it all!" I understand what he means, even though I would word it differently. ☺ One of my Jewish colleagues and friends said not too long ago, "The scripture tells us to love God with all our heart, mind, soul and strength! But the word for strength in Hebrew really isn't a word. It is more like a sound. All our Umph! We give everything to everyone all the time. But God wants that extra something! God wants our umph! God wants us to return in creative extravagance that which God gave us when we were born! That extra push! That ALL in ALL!"

Jesus knew what he was talking about when he said,

“Give to God what belongs to God.” It means no less than to give one's supreme loyalty to the creator's claim upon us and to prioritize everything else accordingly - above country, above job, above family, above personal ambitions. They each have their claims on us, rightful ones, but God's claim on us is the defining priority.

So how much do you think you should “give to God what belongs to God?” We have heard some incredible words from Rev. Kate Huey and Neela, Cori, Jennifer and Neal about giving to God in the last few weeks.

Here is what I believe: I believe you should give what feels generous to you. I believe you should give what feels good to God - who is good to you. Our lesson for today encourages us to give to others what is due to them, but reminds us to first give to God what belongs to God.

And your attitude about giving to God is the most important thing of all. Give with gratitude. Rabbi Harold Kushner has it right when he says, *"If you concentrate on finding whatever is good in every situation, you will discover that your life will suddenly be filled with gratitude, a feeling that nurtures the soul."*

Another voice I love is that of Johannes A. Gaertner. He says of gratitude: *"To speak gratitude is courteous and pleasant, to enact gratitude is generous and noble, but to live gratitude is to touch heaven."*

May your giving to God reflect your deepest sense of gratitude. If so, you, along with Jesus will have escaped the traps and found your way to joy. Amen.