

“The Emperor’s Things and God’s Things”
March 8, 2020 (Second Lent)
St. Paul’s UCC Church
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Mark 12:13-17

Then they sent to him some Pharisees and some Herodians to trap him in what he said. And they came and said to him, “Teacher, we know that you are sincere, and show deference to no one; for you do not regard people with partiality, but teach the way of God in accordance with truth. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not? Should we pay them, or should we not?” But knowing their hypocrisy, he said to them, “Why are you putting me to the test? Bring me a denarius and let me see it.” And they brought one. Then he said to them, “Whose head is this, and whose title?” They answered, “The emperor’s.” Jesus said to them, “Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s.” And they were utterly amazed at him.

About every four years or so, my East-coast friends are suddenly super duper interested that I live in Iowa. “Oh, wow! You’re so important in the election! You’re able to meet so many of the candidates! You have access to so much of the media! You get to be right in the middle of things! *It must be amazing to be in Iowa!*” And for the four election cycles I’ve been here, I’ve had the same thought: yes, it is pretty amazing.

But it can also be kind of...divisive. And hostile. And maybe just a little scary. The way we fight with each other – and I mean on *both* sides of the aisle – can leave me feeling a little depressed about the ways we treat each other. Maybe you feel that way too.

We’re in Mark 12 today. Jesus is getting towards the end of his life. His enemies are closing in. Right before this passage, Jesus goes to the Temple in Jerusalem and starts overturning tables, throwing money on the ground, blocking people from going in and out, bellowing, “You have made my house into a den of robbers!” (paraphrase of Mark 11:17).

Now the religious leaders – you know, the chief priests and the scribes – don’t like this one bit. Not one bit. When they see what he’s up to, messing with their Temple, preaching these radical messages, they decide that they’ve had just about enough of him thank you very much; and they start looking for a way to kill him. To do this, the religious leaders send different people to ask him questions, to interrogate him, to try to find something they can “get him” on. A “gotcha” question, you know. Our story for today is about such an encounter.

Today, it's the Pharisees and Herodians who are trying to trap Jesus. As part of their game, they begin the conversation (the interrogation) by giving him this huge, but totally disingenuous, compliment: "Teacher, we know that you are sincere, and show deference to no one; for you do not regard people with partiality, but teach the way of God in accordance with truth." They are sweet talking him before posing a seemingly impossible question: "Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?"

Now, most folks don't like paying taxes – not now, not then. But especially then, taxes were awful for the Jewish people. Taxes were the worst. They were a dark reminder that the Jews were subjugated to Rome; that the Jewish people were not truly free. So when Jesus is asked, "Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor?" the Jewish leaders are trying to dupe him the best way they know how. If he were to say, "Nah, we're Jews. We really shouldn't pay this. God isn't into it" – that kind of response would show him to be a dangerous enemy of Rome; that wouldn't be good. On the other hand, if he were to say, "Yes, for sure, pay those taxes," then he would seem like a sell-out to his own people. So you see what a thorny issue this is! Jesus really can't win – or so it seems.

So, what will he say?

"Show me the money!" Jesus barks. (What he really says is "Bring me a denarius and let me see it." But "Show me the money!" is my rough, Jerry McGuire-esque translation).

One of them produces a denarius, and Jesus asks, "Whose head is this, and whose title?" The response is straightforward: "The emperor's." Jesus then replies, simply: "Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's." And they were utterly amazed at him, Mark concludes.

"Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's." Jesus has outwitted the Pharisees and Herodians. He has slipped out of their trap. They gave him an impossible puzzle to solve, and he solved it.

...But now I want to know: What does Jesus mean, exactly?" "Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's." His answer is both brilliant and baffling; he answers their puzzle with another puzzle.

Jesus' answer is meant to provoke thought. And so it does. What is owed to the emperor? And, what is owed to God? Here Jesus affirms, in principle, the basic legitimacy of human government: remember, he doesn't say, "Don't pay your taxes!" At the same time, Jesus absolutely insists that what we owe to God is so much greater. And Jesus knows something about us humans: he knows that we don't often give what we should to God. To the contrary, we can sometimes be seen giving to the *emperor* the things that really belong to God.

As I observe our political climate, it seems to me that so many of us give to the emperor – our leaders, our present-day Caesars – what we should be giving to God: our *allegiance*. We look to our leaders to save us. We believe in them, we trust in them, we

commit whole-heartedly to them, we put our absolute faith in them. But if we put absolute faith in our politicians, our politics get very ugly, very fast.

If I believe that my preferred political candidate is the Messiah, then every other candidate must be the anti-Christ. And if you support the other candidate, you must be my enemy. Which means I'm not treating you very well. Which means I'm not listening to you, not having real conversations with you, not opening myself up to you. If your choice in leadership makes you my enemy, than I can never change my mind. And I become hardened. And mean. And closed-down. And cruel.

“Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s.” What about this: what if were to remember that God is God and no one else is God? Simple to say; hard to practice. But especially these days, I wonder what would happen in our politics if we were to wear our allegiances a little more loosely. I know that out there, the louder you scream, the more rhetoric you push, the meaner you are – the more successful you seem. But this is not the way of the One we follow.

Jesus tells us to give to the emperor what is the emperor’s and to God what is God’s. And one thing I’m pretty sure Jesus *doesn’t* want us to give to the emperor: our allegiance. Because when we do, things get ugly. Fast. But when we do the opposite of that – when we put our faith, not in our human leaders and institutions, but in our foot-washing, enemy-loving, all-forgiving Savior – we just might realize that the other candidate and those who support that candidate are actually not our enemies. We’re all doing the best we can; people who support other leaders do so in good faith; and our disagreements don’t need to divide us.

“Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s.”

May it be so.

Thanks be to God.