

Sermons at St Paul's

The 20th Sunday after Pentecost

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In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

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

That sounds so tidy, doesn't it? No ambiguity there!

In one sense, things were clear for Jesus' listeners. Roman taxes had to be paid in Roman coins, and Temple taxes had to be paid in Temple coins. So we hear about moneychangers in the Temple and the Jewish tax collectors for Rome in Jerusalem. And, one could argue, that as the emperor's coins and the Temple coins were distinct, one might, as the King James Bible puts it: *Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's...*” and mentally substitute the Temple for God, so render unto the Temple the things that are the Temple's.

Is that what Jesus really meant? Or was he making the larger point that one should follow the Empire's laws, and also follow God's commandments, without mistaking the one for the other? Well enough -- except that laws and morals don't always split up so nicely. We pay our taxes, and remember Oliver Wendell Holmes' judicial comment: *The prudent avoidance of taxes is no crime.*” But tax evasion is. And there's something distastefully shady about not paying our fair share of the true cost of something – if we can decide what our fair share is. That's sometimes very hard, indeed, and only our conscience can guide us in the murkiest decisions. Even many laws are unclear, and require our complicated system of courts and judges to decide exactly what a law's intent and application should be.

Coming back to our question again, what did Jesus mean us to understand with this apparently simple statement? From what we know of Jesus, he is both utterly truthful and absolutely subtle. So, while it was true that the emperor and the Temple –

and by extension God – required different coinage, only those who spend their lives splitting hairs could be sure that’s all Jesus meant.

Linguist Dan Jurafsky says “All innovation happens at interstices.” In other words, it is where two quite different concepts, roads, or languages cross, that new things happen. So, we might consider that historically, new things were likely to happen when new rulers took over new territories. In our Old Testament lesson today, the prophet Isaiah predicts that King Cyrus of Persia, as he conquers new territory, is going to learn some new things. Cyrus will conquer the Babylonians through the power of Israel’s God says Isaiah (even though he does not know Israel’s God) and will resettle the Jews in their homeland. He will become God’s means of freeing the Jews from captivity.

In his Letter to the Thessalonians, Paul comments upon what happened when the Good News was brought to Macedonia and Achaia in Greece. People turned from idols and began to believe in the living and true God and in Jesus. The old way met the new way, and change occurred.

Perhaps this is what Jesus is suggesting in his example of the coins. When Rome conquered Israel, something new was taking place, and probably no one at that time realized that this historical occurrence was setting the stage for the Messiah’s arrival. Yet it was indeed the opening of that interstice between the emperor and the Temple into which the innovation of the Good News, Jesus’ way of love, could pour into the world. All through the gospels, we can see that both were necessary for the drama of Jesus’ birth, ministry, suffering, death and resurrection to occur.

We live in an interstitial time today – a time when new technologies are rolling through the world we thought we knew, and remaking it. It is a time when so many of the institutions we thought we understood are being broken and rebuilt, or shattered. It is a time when there are seven generational cohorts alive at once – each trying to live in radically differing social organizations. Yes, we could well say that innovation after innovation is happening at the interstices of our times, as the trajectory of one new thing crosses another.

The challenge for us is, to remember Jesus’ words of instruction about how to live as his followers in this new world that is coming into being. He has left us with powerful tools to distinguish between what belongs to the emperor and what belongs to God.

Let's use stewardship giving as an example: we must decide what our "fair share" is when it comes to making certain that St. Paul's is solvent and able to support our many ministries in 2018. That decision can be made in multiple ways. We can use the Scriptural method of a "tithing" or tenth of what we receive in income each year. We can use the tax tables and figure out (at least for this year) what the most advantageous charitable deduction will be on our tax form. We can use the social position method, and decide where we want to place ourselves among our fellow congregants in terms of the published pledge table. We can even follow Jesus' injunction to the rich young man, and sell everything we have and follow Jesus.

What Jesus is asking us to do, I think, is to become even more aware of these competing, intersecting ways of making our daily decisions. Our job is to be clear about how much the emperor is governing what we do, and how much God is influencing us. Some things really are the government's proper sphere, and we live by the laws of this country. Remember to vote! Some things are clearly God's sphere – how and when we worship, what we believe about Jesus, for example. Remember to pray! And then there is the muddle in the middle, where we get to decide what we will do. That's what the story about the two sets of coins offers us – a way to think about how we make our decisions. So, let me commend the many ways of helping you through your daily decisions that we have here at St. Paul's. There are classes offered through the Education Committee, a college-level four year course in religion called Education for Ministry, Sunday Adult Forums, a Wednesday morning Bible-study group, and clergy who are prepared to sit down with you and help you work through hard decisions. A deeper knowledge of Scripture and church traditions can help you assure that God has a role in every decision you make.

Because, you see, for Jesus-followers, keeping the emperor's laws just won't be enough if we have not kept God's laws, too.

Amen.