

The Rev. Wayne Nicholson
St. John's Episcopal Church, Mount Pleasant
16th October 2011
Pentecost 18

I heard a story: "A much loved king was in need of a heart transplant. There was a great concern throughout his kingdom. Everyone gathered outside the royal castle screaming and waving their hands. "Take my heart, King, take my heart!" Well, the king didn't know what to do, but an idea popped into his head. He asked everyone to please be quiet for a few minutes and he told them his plan. He would throw down a feather and whoever the feather landed on, the king would take their heart for the transplant. The beloved king then threw the feather out over the people and watched it drift back and forth. Everyone was still screaming and waving their hands, "Take my heart, King," but with one difference: they were leaning their heads back and blowing the feather back into the air. "Take my heart, King (blow), Take my heart (blow)."" (*Sermons from Seattle*)

Jesus says that we should render unto Caesar that which belongs to Caesar. But really, what belongs to Caesar if all belongs to God? Time and again during stewardship programs or pledge drive we are told that we are merely stewards of God's gifts - that ultimately, what's in our wallets *really* belongs to God and therefore ought to be cheerfully returned to God.

But in the meantime, what I'd like to give to God has been taken by Caesar. Should I allow that? Should I pay my taxes? I mean, after I've bought food and housing shouldn't I be giving *everything else* to God? Should I be withholding my taxes so I can give more back to God? In other words... Couldn't I be increasing my pledge to St. John's by a whole heck of a lot?

Hmmm... perhaps not.

I don't think this is a) realistic (because I'll probably be landed in jail and then not earning anything and then not able to give God *anything* back) or b) a reasonable way to be a responsible citizen.

But there's a paradox here, isn't there? a tension? living on the edge with a dual citizenship?

Over here is my citizenship in the Kingdom of God.
Somewhere over here is my citizenship in the United States of America.
And somehow I need to learn how to balance those out.

Render unto Caesar that which is Caesar's, and unto God that which is God's.

Well, it appears that many people have been rendering far more than they expected unto Caesar. The Wall Street financial crisis has placed retirement savings, 401-K's, IRA's, college savings, stock investments, small business inventories, and home values - and, for some, the very existence of their homes - in jeopardy.

Talk of greed and corruption, blaming Democrats, blaming Republicans, blaming the current White House administration and the potential next one, Wall Street Occupiers, bankers trying to find new ways around regulation – it has all become deeply troubling.

Of course, what has been lost in those 401-K's and retirement funds isn't money in a real sense – that is, it's not the money you have in your pocket that jingles or crinkles, not the money you use to buy your groceries, not the cash or check you give so generously to the ministries of St. John's. It's paper money. Money on paper. Yes, at one time it was in your hands – in your paycheck or in a gift. But then it became something else. Numbers on an investment report, figures quoted by your banker or the Wall Street Journal, and finally your *projected* income for next month or next year or through your retirement until you reach your mortal end.

What Jesus is talking about in today's Gospel, though, is cash. Coin. A hard-earned denarius, the coin of the Roman world in Jesus' and Matthew's time. A denarius was the daily wage of a foot soldier or a common laborer, worth about \$20.00 in today's currency. Real money with a politician's face on it. A politician, by the way, who thought he was a god.

Jesus actually is offering us a little joke. He's returning some of the trickery handed out by the Pharisees by asking them to divide creation into two: God's side, trying to be good, high morals, religion, worship; and the emperor's side – politics, economics, schools, taxes, all that stuff we deal with outside of – well, *church*.

What's the joke?

The joke is, of course, that *all* is of God. But the Pharisees just don't get it. And a lot of *us* don't get it, either.

There is a way of viewing the world which sees God everywhere – in the seas, in the forests, in a flower, or a bird, or a fish, and, ultimately, in one another. It has been for me a reminder that *all* is of God. That there is nothing in the world that is outside God's realm. And so what Jesus is talking about really doesn't have to do with money – it has to do with *power* and with the economy of God's kingdom. It has to do with abundance and it has to do with God's presence.

A coin might have the image of an emperor on it, but we human beings have the image of God imprinted on our very souls. And like an invisible tattoo, we wear the baptismal sign that we belong to Christ – not Caesar – for ever. Citizens of the Kingdom of God *first* – citizens of the empire a distant second.

Whose image is on the coin? Caesar's image.

Whose image is within us? God's image.

Jesus is pointing to the reality of the Kingdom of God: That God, the divine infinity, “out there” and “in here” is present in all things, works through all things, sets fire to the energy in all things.

Caesar can't do that.

The image of God present in all living things, in all men, all women, the image of God is a permanent feature of creation. We can damage it, tarnish it, bury it, but we cannot eliminate it. The darkness will never overcome the light. (cf. John 1:5)

In this is God's grace.

In this is our redemption.

God's image, God's imagination, God's "spark," if you will, continues through time and in all time. It is the presence of God in humanity that ignites our very goodness. It is the presence of God within us that causes us to wonder. It is the Spirit of God within that leads us to search out a deeper relationship with the God who abides in us, a deeper relationship with God who created us, loves us, and transforms us – never abandoning us even when we try to abandon him.

In this, too, is God's grace.

In this, too, is our redemption.

Some preachers this morning will use this passage to illustrate the line drawn between church and state. What do they make of Jesus' response? That religion and state are separate? That our faith shouldn't influence our politics? I don't think that's what Jesus is getting at.

I think that by using his little trick, by answering "yes and no" to the Pharisees and Herodians he's really saying, "yes and no and now and for ever." We are mortals, living lives on earth as best we can, deferring to Caesar when we must yet understanding that ultimately, ultimately, everything we are belongs to God. Everything I am belongs to God.

The God who created me in his image has imprinted my DNA with a marker that says, "This human belongs to me. Return when ready."

In the meantime I will do my best to serve God first, country second. I'll give Caesar what is due, but everything else – my *self* – I will withhold from the government. Because it is *me*, it is *you* who belong to God.

Amen.