

The Rev. Christine Love Mendoza
The Church of the Good Shepherd
The Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost –Sunday, October 18, 2020
Matthew 22:15-22

Almighty God, we ask that you grant us in this world knowledge of your truth, and in the next, life everlasting. Amen.

Oh, the set up was nearly flawless. I do love the stories where the Pharisees, priests, and scribes try to trip up Jesus – try to back him into some legal corner – only to find that he deftly side-steps them only to say “gotcha!”

And these are smart folks – the Pharisees and the like – they are the best legal minds around. It’s not easy to dance out of their verbal traps. But just as soon as you think Jesus is finally caught, he surprises us all with his Houdini-like moves. And the story this morning is like the season finale for this sort of trick. It’s Jesus at his most clever, most wily. And for someone like me who loves, loves, loves good courtroom dramas and snappy, clever dialog, it just doesn’t get better than this.

This time it’s the Herodians and the disciples of the Pharisees who conspire to entrap Jesus. At first, they sound like big-money lobbyists seeking to influence a congressional committee chair, offering slavish praise of their target’s character: “Teacher, we know that you are sincere, and teach the way of God in accordance with truth, and show deference to no one; for you do not regard people with partiality.” But Jesus (and we listeners, too) hear all this suspicious flattery for what it clearly is – an attempt to butter him up so he doesn’t see the next thing coming.

But then it comes: “Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?” Ahhhh.....here we go. This is the point to which all the insincerity was driving. As well as the point of division for the two factions conspiring to entrap Jesus. As agents of Rome, the Herodians favor the tax and may well be lining their own pockets before the revenue gets shipped out of the province. The Pharisees, however, like other Jewish people of their day, resent the tax as well as the idolatrous image of Caesar that was imprinted on the coins required to pay it.

So, here is the conundrum. If Jesus supports the tax, the Pharisees can accuse him of disloyalty to God. If he opposes the tax, the Herodians can charge him with sedition. In other words, it is a classic dilemma of damned if you do and arrested (and possibly killed) if you don’t!

Always one to speak in images—typically in the form of parables, but this time taking advantage of a visual aid—Jesus asks about the coin. Then he refuses their framing and offers a different picture, suggesting that God’s values are not the same as the world’s values. “Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s.” Or, as the King James translation puts it best: “Render unto Caesar the things which are Caesar’s and unto God the things that are God’s.”

As one commentator summarized the lesson: “[Jesus’] statement ends the debate, while leaving an unspoken question hanging in the air. Will we worship the one whose image is stamped on a coin (or on a building, or banner, or campaign poster)? Or will we worship the one who is the very image of God-with-us?”

This points to the most common understanding of this lesson. It is one that sets objects and values of this world in opposition to that of God and God’s kingdom. And I don’t disagree with this understanding, but sometimes I think it can become a touch over-simplified – a bit too dualistic. I suspect that Jesus is even more wily than this – that he might be pointing to even more complex vision. The older I get, the more I understand reality (both of this world and of God’s) as a both-and rather than an either-or.

So, what if the point of this lesson is not to set the values of this world in opposition to that of God? What if by saying “Render unto Caesar the things which are Caesar’s and unto God the

things that are God's," Jesus is drawing a line more nuanced than this pithy summary would suggest? First, I would say that setting up a clear dichotomy between material things and divine things is misleading. In our creation story, we hear of God creating the physical world and all the creatures in it and then declaring it good. So, that sets the stage for understanding the things of this world as also being good. Then we hear of God creating humankind in his own image and declaring that good. So, one could infer that the products of our secondary acts of creation carry with it the imprint of God's image – and thus has the potential to be good as well (albeit also with the potential to be malformed by sin).

It is a complex argument I am trying to build and attention spans may be short, so I will just cut to the chase – if God created all that is – seen and unseen – and declared it good, how can there be anything in this world that is outside of God? Just what is it that we render unto Caesar and what to God? Isn't all of it really God's anyway? Isn't the real truth of the matter that if we first render to God what is God's – our hearts, minds, bodies, and souls – then whatever we render unto Caesar is merely the outpouring of blessed abundance that we have first rendered unto God? What knit is being picked here?

Tricky stuff, this. Especially as it is the first Sunday of our annual pledge gathering campaign. Normally, the preacher with the unfortunate task of trying to preach the gospel of Jesus while also delivering a compelling "gimme your money" argument usually prefers the story of the Widow's Mite. You remember that one: after the self-important wealthy folks show off how much they can deposit into the Temple treasury, then comes along the poor old widow who drops in the singular small coin, thus giving all that she had in an act of remarkable and formidable faith.

But here we are with Caesar's coin rather than the Widow's Mite. So, let me tell you this: Verily I say unto you, render unto Good Shepherd that which is Good Shepherd's! Just kidding! In all seriousness, though, I say unto you: Render unto God everything – your hearts, minds, souls, and bodies – your time, talents, and treasure – your very life. And when you do, you will find yourself living a life of such blessed generosity of spirit and fearlessness that you will then render unto the church and unto your neighbor all that is needed.

Our stewardship theme this year is **One Together**. This theme is derived from the opening acclamations in our Baptismal liturgy: There is one Body and one Spirit; There is one hope in God's call to us; one Lord, one Faith, one Baptism; one God and Father of all. The word "one" is spoken seven times in this short refrain. That we are one is important. Indeed, it may be one of the deepest theological truths revealed in our liturgies.

Before we identify as affiliated with a certain political party, a certain race or ethnicity, a certain socio-economic status, or a certain regional origin – before all that distinction and difference – we are affiliated fundamentally first as children of God and members of the Body of Christ. We are united first and foremost before we ever allow ourselves to be divided. The greatest truth of us – of you and me – is that we are One Together before we are anything else. One Together in the Body of Christ – One Together as children of God – this is our foundation. It is the ground of our very being. It is our deepest truth and it remains so even when we succumb to the temptation to see the other as different.

And this truth is even more important to remember in this time of unprecedented division and discord. Before we are many, we are One. Before we wonder about another person: "are you on my team or the other one?", let us remember that the truth is there is only one team – one community under God, one creation.

Over the next five weeks, we will be engaging in an on-going conversation about what it means to be Christians who are One Together – one community united under the banner of Christ. We will also explore what it means to be One Together in this particular outpost of Christ's Church – The Church of the Good Shepherd. And even more specifically, we will reflect on how being part of the

Good Shepherd parish family has made a difference in our lives during this crazy, fearful, and destabilizing time of pandemic and societal disturbance. We will hear from our friends (both old and new) about how Good Shepherd supported them and encircled them with fellowship, love, and purpose during this uncertain time. And we will invite you to support this parish with whatever treasure you can – render unto Good Shepherd, if you will – so that we may better continue Christ’s work of reconciliation and re-union, both in our lives together and in the world.

In the coming days, weeks, and months, may we continually strive to re-member our fundamental unity in Christ. May we daily give ourselves to God – our selves, our souls, and bodies – so that in our acts of giving to God and to each other and our neighbor, we become a reasonable, holy, and living sacrifice unto God. A living sacrifice – not so much a giving up, but rather a giving over – a rendering, if you will. And may our lives become a continual sacrifice to God, so that we may live the life of hope and blessedness that Christ promises – a life that truly is One Together.

Amen.