

Give to God What Belongs to God

by the Rev. Dr. Paul S. Nancarrow

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

That line from our Gospel reading this morning has a strangely familiar ring to American ears. It sounds to many of us as if Jesus is here actively endorsing our national doctrine of the separation of church and state. It’s as if Jesus were drawing a very clear line of demarcation between two worlds: Caesar’s world and God’s world, the secular world and the sacred world, the spiritual world of Sunday morning and the workaday world of the rest of the week.

And I think a lot of us are kind of comfortable with that line, that division between sacred and secular. I think for a lot of us there is a sense of relief in the idea that once we give to God the things that are God’s, once we fulfill our specifically religious duties of time and energy and money, then we are free to do whatever we want with what we have left. I think sometimes we pretty much bank on the notion that sacred things belong in their own special sphere, and they don’t have much bearing on what we do in our regular, down-to-earth, daily, *real* lives.

There’s just one problem with that interpretation: I don’t think that’s what Jesus meant at all in his teaching about the coin. I don’t think Jesus meant his words to be taken as a simple, cut-and-dried, calculative division of the world and our duties into two parts. Like so many of Jesus’ parables and sayings, I think this is one of those sentences that seems to mean one thing when you first encounter it, but as you think about it more it surprises you by revealing a different meaning—and that surprise of new meaning opens you up to experience the call of God in a new and deeper way.

The first clue that Jesus’ teaching about the coin is not to be taken at face value is that he was giving that teaching to a hostile audience. The Pharisees and the Herodians had come to Jesus to try to entrap him in what he says. The question, “Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor?” is meant to be a trick question, a gotcha question, a question that will get Jesus in trouble no matter which way he answers it. If he says “Yes, it is lawful, pay your taxes,” then the Pharisees will accuse him of being a collaborator with the Romans. They’ll accuse him of agreeing with their political rivals the Sadducees, who thought it was more important to cooperate with the Romans in order to keep the Temple and their religious power base intact, than it was to stand up for the integrity of being God’s people. If Jesus says “Yes, pay your taxes,” then they’ll accuse Jesus of being no better than a tax collector and a sinner himself. On the other hand, if Jesus says “No, it is not lawful, don’t pay your taxes,” then the Pharisees will accuse him of being a Zealot, of belonging to a radical political group that advocated random violence against Roman targets as a way of making it too costly for the Romans to remain in Judea, so as to eventually drive the Romans out. If Jesus says “No, don’t pay your taxes,” they’ll accuse him of being a dangerous terrorist, of running the risk of drawing Roman wrath on the people and punishing them all. The Pharisees figure if they can make people fear that Jesus is dangerous, then Jesus’ public support will dwindle away and it will be easier to get rid of him. It doesn’t seem so different from campaign strategies these days, is it? No matter which way Jesus answers, he’s going to get in trouble with *someone*, he’s going to make *someone* angry—and so the Pharisees think they have Jesus right where they want him.

But Jesus, as he always does in these stories, sees the trap in the trick question, and Jesus refuses to be baited into it. The only decent way to answer a trick question is with a trick answer, an answer that changes the very conditions of the question, turns the question around, and reveals a new way of thinking about things. Jesus starts the turning of the tables on his questioners by asking for a coin, a Roman denarius. Now remember, Jesus is teaching in the Temple, and Roman money was not allowed in the Temple—that’s why there were money-changers in the Temple forecourt—so it’s kind of strange to begin with that one of the Pharisees is able to hand Jesus a denarius so quickly. But be that as it may, a denarius is produced, and Jesus asks them to identify the image and the inscription stamped on the coin. Well, that seems like a pretty simple, straightforward question, so the Pharisees give a simple, straightforward answer: it’s the emperor’s. That’s what they did in the Roman Empire: when a new emperor came to power, he had new coins made with his image and his motto; that

indicated he was in control of the money, and *that* indicated he was in control of the empire. So everyone agrees that the image and the inscription on the coin are the emperor's. "So," Jesus says, "if the image and the inscription mark the coin as belonging to the emperor, then what's the big deal about giving it back to the emperor?" "Just make sure," Jesus adds, "you also give to God what is marked as belonging to God."

Now, if I'd been a Pharisee trying to think my way through Jesus' response here, this is the point at which I'd begin to get nervous. I'd have to ask myself, "What is marked as belonging to God? What bears God's image and God's inscription?" If I were a Pharisee I'd know my scriptures pretty thoroughly, and I'd know that what bears God's image is *me*: according to Genesis chapter 1, the story of Creation, human beings are made in the image and likeness of God: so God's image is stamped on me just as surely as the emperor's image is stamped on the coin. And if I were a Pharisee I'd be wearing phylacteries, little leather boxes strapped to my arm and my forehead, and in those boxes would be strips of parchment bearing the words "Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one." So I would have God's inscription written on me just as surely as the emperor's inscription was written on the coin. And if the image and inscription are what mark something as belonging, then that means that what is marked as belonging to God is *me*. Maybe I give the coin to the emperor, maybe I don't; but what I'm supposed to give to God is nothing other than my whole entire self.

That's why I think the Pharisees in the story are "amazed" at Jesus' answer: it's not just because he wormed his way out of their trick question, but because his trick answer reveals to them that they belong to God in a far deeper and more intimate way than they themselves had known. "Give to the emperor what belongs to the emperor, and give to God what belongs to God" does not set up some sort of separate-but-equal distinction between emperor and God, but reveals that *everything* belongs to God, the whole of human life is lived in intimate relationship with God, and all of us, even the emperor himself, have what we have and do what we do and are what we are because it is in God that we live and move and have our being. Jesus challenges us to see that the secular world is not somehow insulated or protected from the sacred, but that the secular world is precisely the place where we are meant to embody and practice and live out our sacred and holy ideals.

And that's as true for us as it was for the Pharisees and Herodians. We too are created in God's image, we too have God's seal marked on us in Baptism. We too live in a workaday world of politicians and coins and taxes, we too have to make difficult and complicated decisions about how to spend our money and our energy and our time and our involvement, and what's lawful for us and what's not lawful for us and what ought to be lawful for us. And we too are called to engage this secular realm and make these secular decisions guided by sacred ideals—ideals of justice and peace, ideals of truth and righteousness, ideals of compassion and love—ideals that are raised up and strengthened in us in our sacred and holy relationship with God.

And I think that is tremendously important for all of us to keep in mind in this season of our secular and economic and political life. I heard someone remark the other day that we've now entered the "silly season" of the presidential campaign, as we get closer to Election Day, and the rhetoric heats up, and the charges and counter-charges fly, and the candidates seem to do anything they can to eke out one bit of advantage over the other. And in the current atmosphere of financial crisis, a lot of us find ourselves hanging on to the politicians' every word even more intently than we normally would, as feelings of fear and anxiety and even anger play perhaps a larger role in our own political decision-making than we would usually allow. I will not presume to wade into the middle of all that—talk about a question where you'll make someone mad no matter how you answer!—but I will say that I believe we are called to engage this secular political process, no matter what side you're on or what party affiliation you proclaim, I believe we are called to engage this secular political process with a clear intention to embody and live out the sacred ideals we see in Jesus. I believe we are called to engage this secular political process in a way that will bring our community closer to exemplifying the sacred reign of God, the reign of right relationships and mutual well-being, that Jesus exemplified. I believe we are called to engage this secular political process for the sacred purpose of showing forth God's love.

Jesus said "Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and give to God the things that are God's." Let us today give ourselves to God, and let us be glad when God gives us to the world. Amen.