

St. Columba's Episcopal Church
October 22, 2023 – The Twenty-first Sunday after Pentecost
Matthew 22:15-22
The Rev. Dr. Susan Kraus

For several weeks our readings from the Gospel of Matthew have been the record of Jesus' encounters with Jewish religious authorities in Jerusalem during the few days before his crucifixion. We know – as Matthew did – that in one sense the opponents of Jesus will “win.” But Matthew helps us see that the way of God's truth is stronger and better than the deceitful ways of the world, which – without doubt – are to be found in the religious world.

Jesus' teaching about God and God's kingdom has challenged and infuriated the religious leaders. They are angry, and the beginning of this morning's passage shows us clearly how that anger was being expressed. “The Pharisees went and plotted to entrap Jesus in what he said.” The plot we heard this morning was about paying taxes to the Roman emperor.

The Romans had taken over the land of the Jews, the land God had promised and given to them. They occupied the land, crushed rebellions against their rule with cruel and violent retaliation, and they forced the conquered people of God to pay them taxes. By asking Jesus if it was lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, the Pharisees were putting Jesus in an impossible position. If he said “yes,” all the people who regarded him as the Messiah sent by God to rescue the Jews would be outraged. If he said “no,” he risked the death penalty at the hands of the Romans.

Jesus' response to the Pharisees is, in fact, a further challenge to them, an implied question about their loyalties. As long as the Jews didn't cause trouble, the Romans allowed them to practice their religion. So, the religious authorities cooperated with the Romans in several ways. They handled and used Roman coins. Jesus took a coin and asked them, “whose head is this and whose title?” A typical silver denarius of the time would have had a portrait of Tiberius and the Latin inscription translated, “Tiberius Caesar Augustus, Son of the Divine Augustus.” This was clearly incompatible with the Jews' belief in one God, in whose image human beings were created. So Jesus turned the tables on the men who sought to trap him. Matthew tells us “they were amazed and they left him and went away.”

What might we learn from this passage, we who are followers of Jesus but live in such different times and circumstances? We might ask ourselves how we have allowed the ways of the world and the powers of the world to compromise our lives as Christians. We can examine this question in many ways – social, political, economic,

domestic. Our personal discernment may affect everything from how we vote to what we eat. What is important – what I think Jesus challenges us to do – is to ask the question, respond as honestly as possible, and make changes in our lives that move us closer to what God values, according to the witness of the Bible: justice, righteousness, mercy, charity, humility, reconciliation, service, and love.

If we do this, we may, like Jesus, be “losers” in worldly terms. It is unlikely that you or I will be killed for following Jesus. But if we walk through the world on Jesus’ path, we will pay a price. We will “give away” our precious resources of time, talent, and treasure. We will experience a gradual conversion that moves us closer to God and in the direction of greater concern for our neighbors. Jesus said, “Take up your cross and follow me.” There is a cost to the Christian life. So, we need the strengthening medicine of God’s word and sacraments, the church, and the gifts of the Holy Spirit to carry on faithfully.

Jesus told the men who were trying to trap him, “[Give] to God the things that are God’s.” These men would have professed that their lives and all the blessings of their lives, their breath and blood, their place among God’s chosen people, everything belonged to God, the Creator in whose image they were formed. We also profess that everything we have comes from God. The challenging question for us to ask ourselves is this: are we giving lip service to this belief yet living our lives as if some or most of what we have belongs to us, by right? Do we see ourselves as “God-made” or “self-made” persons? And how does our answer to that question impact our lives – our inner lives of thoughts and feelings, as well as our outer lives as people living in the world?

The Bible – Old Testament and New Testament – has a great deal to teach about money. Much more, in fact, than it has to teach about sex, though some Christians seem to think otherwise. The teaching of scripture about money is in sharp contrast to many of the assumptions of our present-day culture and its focus on self-gratification and self-aggrandizement.

I am not going to preach to you about how you should handle your money. Each of us has different circumstances – we are at different stages of our life cycle, we have different amounts of money in our control, we have different responsibilities and obligations, and so on. But I thought I would share with you some thoughts that have guided me through the years, that I have found helpful.

First, the commonsense idiom – “put your money where your mouth is” – with an intentional focus on where our mouths are in worship and in private prayer. For example, today we will pray “for the poor and the oppressed” in our Prayers of the People. In what ways are we putting our money where our mouth is for the poor? Over the years there have been times when writing a sermon has “cost” me a check!

Next is an idea from the writings of the popular Christian apologist, C.S. Lewis. He asserted that we should give money for the aid of others to an extent that our generosity has an impact on our own lifestyles. Does what we give involve some sacrifice of our spending on ourselves or is it too little to make any difference?

Many years ago, I knew a group of Roman Catholic Franciscan nuns in New York. As a community they decided how to use their limited financial resources. From time to time one of the sisters would bring a personal request; for example, the money to pay tuition for a course or the money to travel. As a group the sisters made decisions so that each sister would have what she needed, but not always what she wanted. That differentiation feels healthy to me. It also demands an honest assessment of need versus desire.

In the Bible we find many instances of people making “thank-offerings” to God, often for being delivered from some affliction or being rescued from adversaries. I have found that my gratitude to God has been both expressed and strengthened when I have made a gift to the church or to a charitable organization after an important event, such as the successful outcome of surgery. We seem to continually ask God for help, but we sometimes neglect to thank God in a concrete way for the concrete help we have received.

One final thought for now. The witness of the Bible has taught me that God desires our hearts to be compassionate, as God’s heart is. Compassion may be the best motivation we can find and nurture for generosity to those children of God who are less fortunate than we are.

Thanksgiving and compassion. Last week Erik Bertelsen announced that this year – as last year – we will be supporting the St. Elizabeth’s Annual Coat and Boot Drive centered at St. Luke’s Cathedral in Portland. We have a month until Thanksgiving Day. I ask that you prayerfully consider how to make a thank-offering to God through a gift to this project in compassion for the poor and for refugees who need help to be warm this winter. There are several ways to contribute. Used coats and boots in good condition can be donated. Perhaps you and a friend can work together and sort through your closets. New coats and boots, especially in large sizes, can be purchased. Again, perhaps you and a friend can shop for these items. Finally, money can be given so the volunteers at St. Luke’s can shop for what is needed most. Put aside what you can as a thank-offering. In this month leading to Thanksgiving commit yourself to generous giving and be mindful of the effect on your soul. And think of how one human being made in God’s image will be warm because you, who are made in God’s image, have opened your heart and your hands – and rejoice! Amen.