St. Columba's Episcopal Church
October 18, 2026 – The Twenty-first Sunday after Pentecost
Matthew 22:15-22
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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, then and now.

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 just heard 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. The Romans 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 <u>their</u> 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, including using 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 <u>Divine</u> 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 do the ways of the world and the powers of the world compromise the way I follow Jesus?" 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 we can, and then ask this question, "Are there changes I can make in my life that move me 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. I want to speak briefly about two aspects of our use of money and possessions that are important in the Bible.

The first is sacrifice. When a person makes a sacrifice to God, he or she gives something of value to God, placing the gift beyond further use for themselves. In the Bible that might be money given to the Temple or wine or oil poured out onto an altar or onto the ground. We continue such sacrifices in the church now when we give money to the church and when we pour the unconsumed wine of the Eucharist onto the ground after the worship service. Giving alms to the poor is another form of sacrifice to God much praised in the Bible. The point of sacrifice is to give without any return for our gift. In the world people may give money to a good cause, in part for the reward of having their name attached to the gift or for some other form of personal gain. The gift is a good gift, but you can see it is not quite a sacrifice in biblical terms.

The second is "thank-offerings to God." 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 in my life or in the life of someone I care for, such as recovery from illness. We seem to continually ask God for help, but we often neglect to thank God in a concrete way for the concrete help we have received. Making a "thank-offering" is one way of doing more than giving "lip service" to our faith. Making contributions to the United Thank Offering – using the blue boxes if that is helpful – is a contemporary example of giving thank-offerings to God.

One final thought for now. The Bible teaches us 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.

As we go forward, as individual followers of Jesus and as a community, may God guide us to "give to God the things that are God's" with thankful hearts and for the good of all God's people. Amen.