

Sermons at Christ Church

Be a Joyful Gift to Others.

Pentecost 21

Rev. Emmanuel Mercer

Whose head is this, and whose title? Asked Jesus. The gospel story recounts a plot by the Pharisees to entrap Jesus. The reality is that there was no way that they could arrest the innocent.

If they want to arrest Jesus and to punish him as they wanted to, they had to find him guilty of something. They have pulled every trick under heaven and now this question-whether it was lawful to pay taxes to the emperor.

I remember when I first arrived in the United States as a student. I was walking around downtown Atlanta, right by Georgia State University campus. I needed a pencil and so I walked into this store to purchase a pencil. I checked and the pencil was 90 cents. And so I gave the cashier a \$1 bill and expected a dime from her.

To my utter surprise, this lady gave me a couple of cents back. I was like why. I gave you a \$1. Yes, you gave me \$1 but you have to pay taxes. She responded. You have to pay taxes for a pencil? I asked. Yes. She responded. Well, where I come from, you don't pay taxes on pencils. "Well, then you might as well go back to where you came from." She said.

That was my first rude awakening to the idea of paying taxes-even for something as insignificant as a pencil. Yes, I had come from a place where the tax system wasn't robust and so many people didn't even pay taxes. But here I was, in a different country and an environment where as fair or unfair as the tax system may be, people paid them. It is obligatory to pay those taxes.

For a moment, I'd like you to just take your mind back to the last time you saw your paystub. Sometimes you wonder if you work for the government.

And then at the end of the year, when you file your taxes and you are not lucky, you pay some more taxes in addition to what you have already paid. There's an obligation, a duty that you and I owe, to pay taxes, whether we like it or not.

Jesus lived under the same obligation. He didn't have a 9-5 kind of job nor did he had to fill out form 1040 or any other tax form but he, like many others were expected to honor their obligations to the emperor.

Jesus has been preaching and gathering along the countryside, and those who yearned for God's salvation have been flocking to hear his message. But the Pharisees don't like it. While Roman rule is not everything they would hope for, Roman rule is at least keeping them in power, ensuring that they still have some authority and there are thousands of citizens who are still beneath them and count on them for direction and guidance.

The Pharisees didn't particularly buy into the upside-down world that Jesus is proclaiming. For that reason they have been trying to lay traps for Jesus with their questioning. You have to bear in mind that even at that time you need a probable cause in order to arrest someone.

And for them to achieve that they had to devise a means by which in answering their questions, Jesus would violate the law. They believe Jesus to be a fraud, but how are they to arrest him? Jesus wriggles himself out of their traps all the time, and today's trap isn't any different.

But on this particular occasion, the Pharisees invited the Herodians. They devised a flawless plan. They will ask Jesus to declare his loyalty either to God or to the emperor. "Is it lawful," they ask, "to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?"

The people of Israel paid taxes for a number of things, least of which was the taxes they paid to Rome to occupy their lands. The fact of the matter is that it costs Rome to occupy the many different places, and they exacted taxes from these people in order to ensure the peace that they want.

The people of Israel then were forced to pay taxes to fund the government which oppressed them. And in paying their tax, they paid with a coin bearing the image of the emperor who oppressed them, more than that they also affirmed the divine status of the emperor.

Paying the tax to the emperor required a violation of God's law and a violation of their own faith. But what could they have done? There was nothing that they could do, other than to comply.

This is the trap, if Jesus says it is lawful to pay the tax, he sides with the emperor and his loyalists, the Herodians. He would be a sellout, a fraud, caving in to fear and letting down the hopes of all his faithful followers who believed the tax to be wrong but were helpless in resisting its payment.

On the other hand, if he publicly declares that it is against God's law to pay the Imperial Tax, then he might as well declare war against the whole Roman Empire right then and there. Either way, the answer will land Jesus in a world of trouble. They've got him cornered.

But strangely enough, Jesus does not take either option - instead, Jesus reveals a trap door, a third option. He asks for the coin, and the Pharisees are able to produce one.

Jesus then asked them to identify the face imprinted on the coin. It is the emperor's face. "Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's." He charges them. They are astonished. Their plan goes nowhere.

The coin which bears the image of the emperor has value only because of the emperor's image on it. Without that image, there is no value. It is similar to a check. A check has value only because of the signature that is on it. Without the signature, the check has no value.

There's something that establishes value for a piece of paper or a coin to turn into a legal tender with which you can purchase stuff. Remember, none of has value without God. It is God who establishes value for us and our task is to honor and glorify the value that God has placed on each of us.

Just like emperor's image establishes value for the coin, our reality is one where you and I have intrinsic value, not because of what the government says. Our intrinsic value isn't determined by the government. When you read the declaration of independence, there's a line that says: "We hold these truths to be self-evident that all men (women) are created equal and endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights."

Just like the Romans who protected the peace that the people of Israel enjoyed, the government only protects the value that we have. Indeed, the government may abridge those rights or even take them away, but the government cannot take one's value away.

Our value as human beings come from our Creator God because the Creator God created us in His image. Every human being therefore has an imprint of the divine Creator God in him or her. And the good news is that no one can take that value away from anyone.

Indeed, there are those who do not only question your value but they seek to undermine it in any way that they can. Thinking that that is enough for them to take your value from you. But no, it doesn't happen.

This value that we all have is affirmed by God when God sent Jesus Christ to die for us. Our sins made no difference to God. God didn't turn away from us because of our sins, rather God sought to embrace us in spite of those sins. For why would a righteous man die for the unrighteous? St. Paul would ask.

Yes, the righteous Jesus died for the unrighteous because God seeks to renew God's relationship with the unrighteous. And God always takes this step towards reconciliation with the sinner because of the value God has for even the unrighteous sinner.

The interesting question that Jesus asked the Pharisees who tricked him should tell us something about ourselves and our relationship to God. Whose head is this, and whose title? The emperor, they responded. Then give to the emperor what belongs to the emperor. If we all do give to the emperor what belongs to the emperor, what is it that belongs to God that we need to give to God? What can we give to God?

We can only give ourselves-that's all that we have. The reason is, it is the self which bears the image of God. If we truly understand that all that we are and have is given to us by God, then not only can we give to God, but we can use what has been given to us to also be imitators of the apostles and the Lord Jesus Christ who gave themselves as offering for us.

God doesn't ask more than our sacrificial self-that is the highest gift that you can give to God. And when you give the self to God, you don't do it as a sense of obligation, but as an honor, an honor filled with gratitude.

What can we give God during this stewardship season? We can only give the gift of the self. It is only the gift that we have which bears God's image and with which we can honor God. I bid you, this season and always, to honor and glorify God with your very own self. Amen.