

The Rev. Dennis J. Reid

A Sermon for the Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost, Year A | Matthew 22:15-22

St. Alban's Church, Sinking Spring, PA

22 October 2017

In the Name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

When I was much younger, I remember trying very hard to differentiate between my "faith life" and my "regular life." I'm a compulsive list maker, you see, and those lists must have started very early in trying to compartmentalize certain aspects of my life into "spiritual" things and "secular" things. Truly, this was often a very short exercise growing up. Sometimes I read the youth Bible my parents got for me when I was confirmed, but for the most part, the only things that clearly fell into the "faith life" category were going to church or spending time with people from church. As it turned out, almost everything else was "regular life."

I'm not sure why I felt the need to make these distinctions, but I don't think it's an uncommon thing to do, nor am I the only person to try to do it. It's not a great habit to get into, though, because one of the consequences of making categories of "faith life" and "regular life" is always seeing them as separate, that they somehow both exist in the world but are unable or incapable of affecting each other or influencing each other. Another consequence is not simply to see them as separate, but further, to see them as opposing each other, that somehow what happens in worship or at church doesn't count towards the category of "regular" or "real" when in reality, our worship of God is the most real thing that we could possibly do.

Whatever the motivation is to make these distinctions, they clearly stick with us. Our country, as part of the First Amendment of the Constitution, ensures that Congress cannot make laws respecting an established religion nor can it prohibit the free exercise of religion. These clauses are necessary and important parts of the freedoms we have that allow us to meet here at this church together to worship God and enjoy fellowship, though at the same time, the same clauses are often cited in order to drive a wedge between the time we spend here, an hour or so on Sunday morning, and the other 167 hours of the week -- you only have to have heard someone say "I don't talk about religion or politics" to know this to be true.

That's an especially strange phrase coming from Christians. After all, we have been commissioned by Christ to "Go into all the world and proclaim the good news to the whole creation" and elsewhere "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" and again "I tell you, whoever publicly acknowledges me before others, the Son of Man will also acknowledge before the angels of God". In so many ways, the Christian faith is a story to be told -- or as our Presiding Bishop Michael Curry would say, we are members of the Jesus Movement, for his disciples are always on the go, and they are always inviting others into the movement. Stories need storytellers, and each of us by our baptism has been called to tell the story ourselves. Christians do not have the luxury of being silent about our faith. We also don't have the luxury of removing our faith from the rest of our lives, because the truth is, they are one in the same. The Christian faith *is* a way of life.

There will be plenty who will disagree, of course, and that disagreement will often cite today's Gospel reading. You can almost hear the response:

"Hang on, preacher. Even Jesus says 'give to Caesar those things that are Caesar's, and give to God those things that are God's'. If Jesus can separate religion, politics, and the rest of our lives, why can't we?"

It's true. This is probably the most quoted verse of the Bible when it comes to separating our religious beliefs from the rest of what we do in our lives. But hear me out when I tell you that it isn't Jesus' intention to draw a line in the sand between our "faith lives" and our "regular lives". Instead, it's quite the opposite.

In our reading this morning, Jesus is approached by both the Pharisees, the Jewish experts of the law, and the Herodians, those who were supporters of King Herod and the Emperor. These two groups normally didn't care much for one another,

but when they saw a chance to trap Jesus, they team up for their mutual benefit. Together, they ask him "Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?" Each group is hoping to trick Jesus into violating the law. A poor answer would have severe consequences to either authority, for the Pharisees were hoping he would blaspheme against God and the Law of Moses and the Herodians were hoping for him to resist paying one of the Roman taxes, therefore breaking the empire's law. Clearly, Jesus cannot simply answer "yes" or "no", so he did what he so often does -- goes in an entirely different direction and starts asking his own questions instead.

Regarding the coin, Jesus asked "whose head -- whose image -- is this?" Of course, it was Caesar's image, and the things made in Caesar's image were owned by Caesar. One of the taxes that Roman citizens paid could only be paid with this coin. And how did Caesar own anything? Powerfully, without mercy, and with threats to all who would question him. To render anything back to him was done by law and force each year when it came time for the tax.

Jesus was not going to allow himself to be tricked and he certainly wasn't about to pledge allegiance to a so-called divine emperor -- in other words, he had to talk about religion and he had to talk about politics. More accurately, Jesus acknowledges the things that Caesar owns and the things that God owns. Caesar indeed owned the coins, but Caesar has no rightful claim to anything else in the lives of those who are faithful to God.

Now, what does God own? And what things are made in God's image? We are. We have been created by God out of God's eternal love for us, and in doing so, we have been given the choice as to what we give back in return. The things we give back to God are not forced from us but rather given freely, for we know that to serve God is perfect freedom.

That is the choice we have today, too. We could make the choice to separate God from the rest of our lives or we can make the choice to acknowledge God's authority, that God is present in all that we do, and then give thanks for all we have been given by giving back to God in all that we do. And yes, as we talk about financial stewardship and our gifts of money, we must also note that our financial gifts are only a small percentage of this giving. Sure, tithing is a great spiritual goal, and it's something we should all consider -- even if it's something we get to eventually or even slowly. But even tithing isn't everything. If we tithe but never give back to God in any other way, it might as well be worth nothing at all. The truth is -- God doesn't want all of our money, but even were we all to tithe the 10% of what we earn, God does want 100% of our lives.

And we each have but one life -- one life that God has given us, and one life through which God walks with us. So God does not ask for your religious life, your civic life, your family life, your work life, your political life, or your financial life -- God asks for what God owns; God asks for you -- all of you. You have been made in the image of God -- an image of generosity, an image of mercy, an image of love. God has claimed you as his own. The choice is now ours -- how and what we give is truly up to us, but let us remember that in every way that we give, we are giving back to God those things God has already given us -- even our very lives.

Amen.