

Pentecost 20 October 18, 2020 Proper 24

Prayer: O wonderful God, in Christ Jesus you bring your Word to us to transform us into a loving community; may this Word be present in our hearts and minds this day; we ask this in the Name of our savior and friend Jesus, Amen.

What is Jesus getting at in this discussion with the Pharisees that we heard this morning? Well, one way that this lesson has been used throughout history is to justify obedience to the governing authorities; you know: pay your taxes, observe the laws, don't challenge the ruling authorities because Jesus said, "Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's." I think that this is a very simplistic understanding of Jesus' message, and indeed a self serving interpretation, because it is employed by those in power to remain in power. In a very similar way, Jesus' proclamation in John's gospel that, "the poor will always be with you," has been used to justify inaction on the issue of poverty, when what it seems to me Jesus is doing is making a prophetic judgment on our human failings to take care of the "least of these," as Jesus commands us to do. So let's look a little deeper into the context for the meaning of Jesus' saying about taxes this morning. I think in studying the Scriptures, it is always important to look at the context of a passage, like a good newspaper reporter, and just like we learned in school about writing a good report, we have to ask those "who, what, when and where" questions. First, I think the where here is important: this action takes place

in the Temple in Jerusalem, the holiest site for the people of Israel: Jesus has come to Jerusalem from the hills of Galilee, and as he enters the Temple, he shakes things up: he over turns the tables of the money changers, a prophetic denunciation of those who would use the holy space to line their pockets. You might remember that a couple of weeks ago we heard the lesson of the giving of the Ten Commandments from the Book of Exodus. OK, Pop Quiz: anyone remember number 3? “You shall not make a graven image;” don’t bow down to idols, because the Lord God who brought the people out of their slavery in Egypt is God and there is no other. Well, the money changers were there at the entrance of the Temple to take the Roman coins that had a graven image and exchange them for coins without an image so that pilgrims to the Temple could make their offerings and pay the Temple tax in a form that did not violate this commandment. But in an unwritten law that has been in effect for millennia, any time money changes hands, somebody takes a cut. Nowadays we call it “banking fees” or “transaction charges.” You go to the ATM to get your money and the bank charges you a couple of bucks to get your money. Well, Jesus wasn’t having it, especially in the sacred space of the Temple, so he overturned the money changers’ tables.

Jesus goes on to teach at the Temple, and over the past few weeks we have heard a couple of these stories, the parable of the wicked tenants and the parable of the marriage feast, both of which are thinly veiled stories about the powerful and wealthy usurping their privileges, setting

themselves up on their own authority, but eventually justice is served and they are deposed; I say thinly veiled because I think these are more actions in that prophetic denunciation Jesus has for the corruption of the ruling authorities in his time. Needless to say, those in power were alarmed and sought to stop Jesus. But they knew he was popular and they did not want to cause civil unrest. Hence the lesson we hear today, about paying taxes to the emperor. Remember that Israel was under Roman control in Jesus' time, and the leaders of Israel collaborated with the mighty Roman empire to keep their positions of power. So, they test him with a question: should we pay the emperor's tax? Jesus knows it is a trap they're setting, but his answer at first seems pretty clever: he says, "Show me the money." Just like that movie, *Jerry McGuire*, that came out a while ago, "show me the money." And they show him a Roman coin; now first of all the Pharisees and Herodians having a coin shows that they were the wealthy ones, able to reach into their pockets and to pull out a coin, but also it shows that they were indeed being hypocrites, bringing coins with an image into the sacred precincts of the Temple. But I think Jesus' point is really in the second half of the response, not "render unto Caesar" but "give to God the things that are God's." The point, of course, is that it is all God's, regardless of Caesar's claims. God almighty has created the heavens and the earth and has a very different aim than Caesar: Caesar's economy is based on amassing wealth and luxury; God's economy is based on giving God's children what they need. Just like the parable of the laborers in the

vineyard we also heard a couple of weeks ago, all received the usual daily wage to feed themselves and their families whether they worked all day or just a few hours. I think this response, “give to God the things that are God’s” is meant for us in the Church to see the abundance that God has given us and then to remind us of our responsibility to ensure that we recognize the source of that abundance, both in giving God thanks for the abundance and in making sure that we have a responsible attitude and responsible actions with what we have been given.

Of course, when the dust all settles and we have to make a final account, pretty quickly we see that indeed it is all God’s. Caesars of one ilk or another may show up for a time, but, to give, “to God the things that are God’s,” is the ultimate, for all creation, all that is, is indeed God’s. All creation is God’s creation, and thus we are all called to a special care and stewardship for all of creation as well. This means that Jesus is directing us that all we do, all we engage in is for the care of God’s creation, taking care of all God’s people, and especially for the poor and the least of these, as that is God’s very intentional call to the people of God. There is also, just as importantly in our time, a call to care for all creation as well. The other night I saw Sir David Attenborough’s, “A Life on Our Planet.” In this powerful documentary, Attenborough recounts the decline of the healthy of our environment and the serious threat it entails for the future of all life. As I watched Attenborough’s self-described witness statement, indeed with the implication that a crime was committed as well as of a life

of seven decades spent examining the natural world, as I watched it became clearer that all is God's and all creation is to be cared for. We are, as I mentioned, called to be the good stewards of all, but especially for all creation. The call is clear, of course, that each of us must do all we can in our lives to stop climate change and we must also call on our leaders to mount a serious, sustained and collective effort to stop the ravages of climate change. Here in Vermont we are, thankfully, spared many of the effects of climate change so far, but as a state which has come together to stop the pandemic, we should take leadership on climate change to set an example for the rest of our nation.

So what does this mean for us, gathered here at Good Shepherd in worship this morning? We hear that call Jesus makes to each one of us, to move our hearts, to open our souls in this new direction, knowing of God as the one in the midst of all, God at the heart of all we seek; God seeking us out in love that we might love in the deep way God loves each of us. I would say that this is pretty good stewardship by any reckoning and certainly living faithfully into Jesus' teaching to give to God what has been given to us so graciously by God. But I think there is a deeper meaning here as well, also related to our stewardship: that question of taxes still "taxes" we if you will. To me, what Jesus is saying is a message to set our minds on the abundance of God's mercy, to open our hearts and to open our lives in the light of that divine love, and in doing so, to take care for the great human need around us, caring for our neighbors, caring

for those Jesus called, “the least of these,” caring for others as God cares for us. And thus it has been as well for the church throughout history: As Paul wrote to those early Christians in Thessalonica, probably a rather small band of mostly social outcasts, but still a group that the Apostle says are renown, that “in every place their faith in God has become known,” because “the Gospel came to them not in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction.” May that same power and that same conviction be evident here in our lives and in our life together here at Good Shepherd, so that our faith in God leads us to celebrate and give thanks to God for the great abundance of mercy God grants in our lives, so that we serve the needs of God’s people in the spirit of that grace abounding. Thanks be to God for this great love; thanks be to God for this amazing grace. Amen.