

"More than Taxes."

Ex. 33:12-23; Ps. 99; Matt. 22:13-22
Chapel Lane Presbyterian Church
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With so much attention these days on money and politics, it comes as no surprise to see that, once again, the Bible is full of both. Jesus, the prophet and miracle worker from Galilee, is in the capital city of Jerusalem stirring up the crowds and annoying the authorities.

It is the week before the crucifixion and the politicians are looking for a way to torpedo him, but they have to tread lightly because the crowds love what Jesus is saying about the kingdom of God and the life of faith.

On this particular occasion a trap has been set for Jesus. It's the "tax trap". Needless to say, the question of taxes has "never" been used to try to trip up a public figure, right?

The word "tax" always rankles a bit. Has anyone ever liked to pay taxes? It's hard enough to pay them when they are going to one's own government, but imagine if we were being occupied by a foreign country and we were being forced to pay taxes to that oppressive regime.

That's the world in which Jesus lived. Rome was in charge and Rome reinforced her power with the sword and the cross: She used the sword to conquer and the cross to remind everyone of who was in charge and what the penalty was for disobedience.

So, with the large shadow of the Roman Empire behind them, the Pharisees and Herodians approach Jesus. They have the self-assurance of someone who has surveyed every possible move on the board and is ready to yell "checkmate!" With feigned innocence they

put the inflammatory question about taxes on the table, thinking that they've got him for sure.

It's not much different nowadays: One candidate charges that the other's plans will raise taxes while theirs won't. This confrontation with Jesus is just another version of the same old, church-picnic "egg toss" to see who can make something stick.

The Pharisees and Herodians want to make the charge of treason to Rome stick to Jesus. Failing in that, they'd be just as happy to make the charge "friend of the Emperor" stick. Either way, they think they've got him right where they want him.

But, Jesus, "aware of their malice" as Matthew tells us, asks an innocent question of his own. "Show me the coin," he says. He wants to see the coin of the hated Romans. Here is where the tables start to turn and the trap for them begins to be sprung.

They are able to produce the coin. It has the face of the emperor on it. On one side of the coin it reads: "Tiberius Caesar, Son of God". The other side of the coin says: "Great High Priest."

You could flip that coin all day long and God-fearing Jews would be up in arms no matter which side landed face up. Their religion did not allow any graven images. Besides, who did this Caesar think he was, claiming to be the Son of God and Great High Priest? That's blasphemy! But, of course, one couldn't say that too loudly for fear of being hauled into the Roman court to answer to the charge of treason.

A truly righteous Jew shouldn't carry a Roman coin and certainly not within the walls of the Temple, where this conversation is taking place. However, the much-hated currency of the oppressive foreign regime was in their hands -- their Law-abiding, God-fearing hands.

What does this tell us about them? How observant were they in their religious practice? Hasn't the very presence of the coin compromised their position and the religious "high ground" upon which they thought they were standing?

Jesus' answer astounds and amazes them and all who heard him. He says to them: "Caesar's face is on the coin. It obviously belongs to him. Give him the things that belong to him." And in typical fashion, Jesus goes further and gives things a faith focus and a God focus. He highlights and underscores the distinction between the things of this world and the things of God.

"Give to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's."

In telling them to give the coin with the emperor's image on it back to the emperor and to give to God the things with God's image on them, Jesus makes it clear that Caesar and his petty politics are no match for the sovereignty of God.

Jesus draws a line to separate the things of Caesar and the things of God. He challenged them and he challenges us to consider carefully just what does belong to God and what does not. He didn't do this in order to assess a "God Tax", but to reawaken their understanding of God's place in their lives.

Scripture tells us that "the Earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof." It also reminds us right from the start in *Genesis*, that we are made in God's image, according to God's likeness. We are the coin of God's realm.

Jesus warns his followers about storing up treasures on earth where

rust and moth consume and thieves steal. Jesus encourages his followers to know where their true treasure lies and to attend to their spiritual storehouses with the same or greater passion than they do watching over their portfolios.

This encounter between Jesus and the Pharisees is about much more than taxes. It is a reminder to us that we are God's people and we belong to God. Giving back to God is not a tax plan. It is a way of life that leads to life, to more abundant life.

When we think of what it might mean to give ourselves back to God many things come to mind. We think of areas of service and sacrifice that many are making to see that others know they are not alone and that people do care about them. We think of those who have set aside some of their own time and money and effort to reach beyond themselves. We think of those who have heard the Biblical question: "What does the Lord require of you?" and are fashioning their own answers to what it means to "do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with their God."

Sometimes the thought of reaching out to others and moving beyond our own sphere of personal concern and worry is difficult to imagine. With the economic times in which we live it is easy to be afraid and hard to trust. Fear hangs heavy in the air we breathe. We worry about ourselves and our family. We fret over our investments and our future security. We are afraid that if we give away a greater proportion of our wealth we may find ourselves in need.

Once again, Scripture calls us back to our better selves and reminds us that love is the greatest antidote to the fear that would cause us to batten down the hatches, keep a weather eye on the financial forecasts and ignore the call to look beyond ourselves to the world around us.

Scripture tells us that "perfect love casts out fear". A perfect love of God and a perfect trust in God's promises removes the terror of the unknown from our souls. A more perfect love of neighbor calls us to cast a wider net of care and concern and involvement in the world around us.

As we grow in our understanding of the depth of God's love for us we grow in our ability to let go of our fear and allow God's joy to enter our hearts. We stand up and say we will not give in to fear. We will try to trust God, even if only for one more day.

As we remember what God has given us in the gift of life itself, in the gift of life eternal that is ours through Christ, in the gift of the abiding presence of the Holy Spirit each and every day, and in the gift of our opportunity to be a part of caring Christian community, trusting God becomes easier. And we know that one way to express that trust and also to say thank you to God is through offering up to God out of our abundance, not as a tax but as an expression of trust and confidence that God is able to do "far more abundantly than all that we might ask or think".

We know there are crying needs all around us. We know that we cannot address them all, but we have already made a significant impact in our community and in the world. I want to see that continue and I believe that you do too. Together we can remember to give to God the things that are God's and lay claim to the joy that comes from responding to God in faith and hope and love, trusting beyond sight and living lives that are filled with thanksgiving and generosity of heart.

May it be so for us, for Jesus' sake. Amen.