

No simple answer

*Sermon preached by the Rev. Lynn C. Sanders, Associate Rector,
at the nine o'clock service, October 16, 2011, The Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost.
Based on Matthew 22:15-22.*

What are the chances of getting a gospel about taxes today, I ask myself, as I work frantically to finish my 2010 taxes by the October 17 tax extension deadline. Tomorrow looms, uncomfortably. In my darker moments I suspect this is Divine Justice. In my lighter moments, I conclude that the Holy Spirit continues to have a sense of humor. Either way, I have taken vows never to let this happen again.

What are the chances of our having a gospel about taxes today, I ask myself, as I've followed the news reports of the protesters gathered downtown in Zuccotti Park, and yesterday in Times Square, and now in over 90 countries here and around the world. The "presenting issue" for these protests isn't taxes *per se*, but taxes do seem to play a part in what's being protested.

For the past month, Zuccotti Park has been the home base for the Occupy Wall Street protest, now gone global. Full disclosure: I haven't been to Zuccotti Park myself, but have been following the reports, both in the news and from the listserv for Diocese of New York priests. As far as I can tell, the folks in Zuccotti Park are protesting what they consider to be our unfair and broken financial system. They are demonstrating against the corporate greed and corruption that has led to the chronic joblessness, rising debt and income inequalities that our economic system breeds and perpetuates.

The scene in Matthew's gospel raises some of the same issues. Jesus' community and Matthew's community two generations later were living under Roman occupation and oppression. The tax mentioned is a "head tax" on every adult that had to be paid in Roman coin, the coin of the realm. Roman coins bore an image of the emperor and an inscription like "Tiberius Caesar, august son of the divine Augustus, high priest." For Jesus' and Matthew's communities, this "tax" and the Roman coin were painful jabs, reminders of their oppression; the Roman coin carrying its image of the Emperor and referring to him as a god were blasphemous to them.

Jesus has entered Jerusalem for the last time. His teaching and healing have drawn the crowds to him, but tensions between Jesus and the Pharisees have been increasing. Just the day before, Jesus has overturned the moneychangers' tables in the Temple. The Pharisees want to destroy Jesus' influence, but they're being devious about it.

They come up with a question that, no matter how Jesus answers it, will get him in trouble. "Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?" It's one of those no-win, yes-no questions, one we're taught never to answer, like "Have you stopped beating your spouse yet?"

If Jesus answers, "Yes, the tax is lawful," then the crowds—egged on by the Pharisees and their disciples—will reject him for supporting the Romans. If Jesus answers, "No, the tax isn't legal," then the Herodians (who do support the Roman regime) will rat Jesus out to the Roman rulers, who will arrest him for inciting rebellion.

But Jesus doesn't swallow either the flattery or the bait. Instead, Jesus gives a more deeply true answer to their question: "Give back to the emperor the things that belong to the emperor, and give back to God the things that belong to God."

Contrary to what some believe, this is not Jesus instituting the separation of church and state. By the way, when in history have church/religion and state/politics ever been truly separate? Please let me know, because I can't find that time in history. And what is inscribed on the coin of our own realm? "In God We Trust." Interesting.

Our own economic system, unfair and broken though it may be, is oppressive to many, perhaps to the 99% of us, but even so, that's not quite the same as being occupied by a foreign power. The Temple in Jerusalem is not quite Wall Street or Zuccotti Park. But still . . .

Return to the emperor the things that belong to the emperor, and return to God the things that belong to God. Jesus' answer points to something deeply true for Jesus' and Matthew's communities, and to something equally true for our communities today. By not giving a simplistic answer or a quick formula for how to decide what belongs to our emperor—however we define that—and what belongs to God, Jesus acknowledges that humans will always live under an empire of some sort, and we will always live under God. By not giving a simplistic answer or formula, Jesus challenges all of us to think, to question, to wrestle to find our own balance in this reality.

Who or what is our emperor? What belongs to our emperor? What is it we owe or should give back to the empire? What belongs to God? What is it we should give back (return) to God?

If the Roman coin shows the emperor's image, then what is it that shows God's image? God's image . . . hmmm . . . anything come to mind? "So God created humankind in God's image, in the image of God God created them; male and female God created them." (Gen 1:27) We are made in God's image. We are God's beloved children. We belong to God. As we just sang, "[God] alone calls my heart to be his own."

So how do we negotiate the practical complexity of living faithfully in God's image amidst the realities of our world? Well, if Jesus didn't spell the answer out for us, don't expect me to!

But here's a practical suggestion: Write down, or call up on your computer, everything you've spent money on this past month, or this past year if you can. Order the list categories by amount, with the highest amount at the top. Look at your ordered list. What does it tell you?

Now try the same thing with time. Make a list of everything you've spent your time on this past week (or month, if you can), and how much time you've spent on each: sleeping, eating, working, time with family/friends, commuting, doing something for someone else, investing in something larger than yourself, worrying, relaxing, just plain old downtime. Order your categories, with the highest number of hours at the top. Look at your ordered list. What does it tell you?

I would suggest that when we look at our lists, we are looking at our priorities. Where we give our money and our time tells us very clearly what we are valuing most highly. Does what you see match up with what you think you value most? Does what you see reflect what you believe is most important in your life? If not, what would need to change?

If my list on paper and my list in my heart don't match up, then I have some work to do. The mismatch may call me to re-assess my priorities and possibly make some changes in my own living habits.

I wonder about when the mismatch seems for reasons out of my control: suddenly my bank fees rise sharply, or my medical bills far exceed my income because I've lost my job and insurance, or I'm paying more on my mortgage than my home is worth, or I'm paying higher taxes on less income. What happens when the mismatch seems to be from forces I can't control? What then is the faithful response?

Jesus' answer in this gospel was a wake-up call to everyone who heard him. It can be a wake-up call to us, too.

Let's make our lists, and ponder them in our hearts. May God give us the grace and courage to get clear about our priorities and to take faithful action.

And remember that some things we give to God are deductible from the things we give to Caesar.

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