

“Render to Caesar”
Rev. Susan M. Prichard
October 19, 2008

The Pharisees, seeking to trap Jesus, ask him whether it is lawful to pay taxes to Caesar. Listen for and hear God’s message to us in these words of scripture.

Matthew 22:15-22

I’ve always loved this story. In it, Jesus wiggles out of a tricky spot with the Pharisees and gives us an answer to some difficult life questions.

“Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and render to God the things that are God’s.” In this simple answer to a tricky question, our obligations can be sorted out. Every April, I go to my account to find out what my financial obligation is to the government— federal and state, our equivalent of ‘Caesar’. And I pay my taxes, as do most of you. Our financial obligation to the government is calculated on constantly changing tax formulas. But once the formula is established and our debt calculated, all we need to do is write a check and mail it in the pre-addressed envelope. Or, if you file on-line, the IRS just sends you a bill. You can even charge it on a credit card.

Our taxable debt is fulfilled. Many of our citizens go on to further fulfill an obligation to our free society by enlisting in our military or by holding public office. Many of us further participate by voting in elections or volunteering in our communities. Our debt to society is handled in many ways.

Our debt to God is a whole other story. As long as there was no separation of church and state, people paid their taxes to the church. It was a two-for, both the government and the church were supported. In colonial America, the work of government and of God were viewed as the same. But that is no longer the case. As mainline Protestants, we have to work out our obligation to God ourselves. There is no Pope or Bishop who requires us to give to the church. There is no pledge police that comes to our door and presents us with a bill. There are no dunning letters sent to threaten us to support our church. Ours is a voluntary system that has worked for a couple hundred years. So, why isn’t it working now? Why are we running a deficit? Why are our lay leadership so worried about the future of our church?

I think it is because we have our priorities confused. I think we have forgotten who we are and whose we are. I think it’s because we put more faith and trust in the false gods of consumerism than in the Holy One who created all that is. We have abdicated our birthright as children of God and chosen instead, to be nodding acquaintances.

As a teenager, growing up in Waterbury, I was blessed to have a pastor who preached stewardship— not just once a year, but all the time. I grew up knowing that I belonged to the whole human family, that I was blessed by God, that I had a personal responsibility to share what I had with others. I knew that if I claimed to be a Christian that I had to act like one— not just by following a bunch of rules, or going to seminary and working for the church, but by living a life worthy of that designation. I learned early, that part of my time, talent and treasure was meant to be shared.

Now, in seminary, I learned that we were never supposed to make ourselves the 'good' sermon example. But I do not know how to preach stewardship, except by example. I can’t, as your pastor, ask you

to do something that I, myself, am not willing to do. I cannot implore you to increase your pledges without increasing my own.

I grew up lucky, in so many ways. Not just lucky to be born in America, to a Christian family with roots in Congregationalism going back hundreds of years, but lucky to have grown up knowing and understanding what I need to render to God. I grew up not caring if I had the newest fashions, the biggest house, or the coolest car. I grew up knowing in my heart of hearts, that I belonged to God; and that everything I would become and all that I would possess were unmerited gifts. Yes, I had to work hard for every penny I earned. Yes, I had to work hard for every good grade that I got. Yes, I had to work hard at every personal relationship I would have with family, friends and coworkers. But all of it came to me as a result of who God created and molded me to be. I know that I am imprinted with God's image, and so I know what I owe to God.

Jesus dazzled the Pharisees because he knew that the coins they were holding were only imprinted with the seal of Caesar. He knew that all God's children are imprinted with the image of God. It was easy for him to differentiate. Coins with Caesar's pictures on them, were used to pay Caesar's taxes. The coins came from Caesar, it only made sense that some of them were owed to him.

But what was easy for Jesus becomes difficult for us. We wrestle with what it is that we owe to God. And then we struggle with giving it gratefully and graciously. Yes, the money that we give comes bearing the pictures of former Presidents of our country—bearing the image of the government. But it is with those dollars we provide for the church and all its ministries. Even though it says: In God we Trust on the back of the bills, we don't really trust in God, or we'd share those dollars more readily.

Rendering to God the things that are God's requires a new way of looking at life. It requires giving God the first fruits and not the leftovers of our lives. It requires us to accept our connectedness to all God's children and our responsibility for caring for those in need. It requires us to put our relationship to God and to the church higher up on the list of the things that make demands our time, our talents and our money.

I spent some time yesterday, at the Connecticut Conference Annual Meeting talking with a stewardship consultant. Most of the people who had come to speak with her were looking for ways to increase their pledge base. But she and I were both amazed at how few of the people we talked with thought of stewardship as anything other than something to cover the church budget. If we are going to change the attitude of the people who sit in the pews about this, (meaning all of us as well as our members who aren't here today), we need to not only preach and teach about stewardship; we also have to teach our children. Attitudes of generosity are learned behaviors.

"While it's easy to focus on ourselves and to become overwhelmed by the stresses and demands of our daily lives, we need to look up and look out. We need to remember that we are part of something bigger; a larger community, a nation, a world. For Christians, the basis for our allegiance to our community, our nation and our world is our faithfulness to God and our commitment to following the way of Jesus Christ in love, in justice, in forgiveness, and in peace". (Rosemary Rocha in Minister's Annual Manual, p.91)

Render to the government the things owed to the government, and to God the things that are God's.

With God's help-- we will.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

"Give as you would if an Angel, awaited your gift at the door.
Give as you would if tomorrow, found you where giving was o're.
Give as you would to the Master, if you met his searching look.
Give as you would of your substance, if His hand, the offering took."

Rev. Dr. Cornelius N. Bakker