

Matthew 22:15-22
March 19, 2023 - *You Are God's Coin*

In today's gospel we see the smug Pharisees and Herodians try to trap Jesus on what appears to be a political issue: whether or not it is lawful to pay taxes to Caesar. In the Middle Eastern culture, a question is always intended and perceived as a challenge to one's honour. Up to this point, Jesus had been debating with the chief priests and elders. Now the Pharisees and Herodians launch an attack on him.

The Pharisees were religious purists who would have liked to avoid paying taxes to the gentile overlords. They are against the occupying Roman government and intend to trap Jesus by what he says, so they enlist the support of the Herodians, who were Jews and partisans of the ruling Roman family.

Together, trapping Jesus should be easy. They begin with false flattery in their opening remarks: "Teacher," they said, "we know how honest you are. You teach the way of God truthfully." Their insincerity is obvious. Then, they spring the trap: "Now tell us what you think about this: Is it right to pay taxes to Caesar or not?"

Jesus is prepared for their game. He sees through their sarcasm to the malice that lies beneath these hypocrites. Now Jesus carries no

coins. The Pharisees dare not carry Roman coins, for they bear the blasphemous image of Tiberius Caesar with the inscription, “Tiberius Caesar, majestic son of the majestic God and High Priest.” Yet, when Jesus asks for a Roman coin, the Pharisees readily provide it. There, in the sacred space of the temple, the hypocrites themselves possess the idolatrous image.

The Pharisees are thinking two moves ahead in this game. If Jesus says that it is lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, he alienates the people who hate the Roman occupation and its Caesar. If he says it is unlawful to pay taxes, the people will be pleased, but he will be liable for arrest by the Romans. A clever strategy.

Jesus asks them whose inscription is on the coin. Caesar, they answer. “Then render to the emperor what is due him, he says, and to God what belongs to God.” Jesus wins the game. But this is not just a game; and the teaching reaches far – reaching into our own time. Render unto that Caesar whatever is due. But, don't mess around with the things that belong to God.

But to whom do we belong? Take a look at any person. Whose inscription is on him or her? Each is made in the image of God. There can be no doubt, then, what Jesus means here. Give yourselves to God because it is to him that you belong. Has God's

face ever been on a coin? No! We are the coin that bears the living likeness of God. Giving of ourselves with whatever that may include, is the only legal currency of the kingdom of heaven.

It is God who claims us, who made us in his own image. We do not belong to anything or to anyone else. We belong to God in all our being, with all our talents, interests, time, and wealth. *"We give thee but thine own, whatever the gift may be. All that we have is thine alone, a trust, O Lord, from thee."*

The consequences of belonging to God are significant. It means that God will not forsake us. The Pharisees and the other religious leaders whom Jesus condemns, were notoriously bad at caring for the people. Unlike God who never forsakes his own, they forsook their responsibilities and the people God put into their care.

This means that because we belong to God, we belong to the people of God, the body of Christ. We are baptized into this fellowship. And we give to God that which belongs to God, that is, we give ourselves. We take the sacred trust and invest it in lives of worship. Sometimes, that worship occurs privately, in devotion. Sometimes, in church with our brothers and sisters in Christ. And the rest of the time, it occurs in the sphere of daily work and service. It is all worship. Ultimately, giving ourselves to God means that we

give ourselves to the world.

As a young girl, Laurie liked to play hymns on the piano and sing. She always started and finished with her favourite, "*Take My Life That I May Be.*" And while she sang, she dreamed about the future. "*Take my life that I may be consecrated, Lord, to thee....*" What would she do with her life? She'd be lost in hopes as she continued, "*Take my hands and let them move at the impulse of your love....*"

But there was one line she never quite liked. "*Take my silver and my gold, not a mite would I withhold....*" It seemed a little out of touch with reality, that "not a mite" part. After all, you had to live in the world. And it takes money. She wondered about her financial responsibilities as a Christian.

Jesus said, "Well, then, give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar, and give to God what belongs to God." The Jews knew what that meant. The message was prevalent throughout the psalms. "The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it." The rulers of the world claim a portion of our goods, but they do not own what is God's. It took Laurie a long time to understand what this means. "*Take my life that I may be, Consecrated, Lord, to thee ...*"

When Laurie graduated from college with an elementary education

major, she took a one-year position as a teacher in a little village in Mexico. She had heard about poverty in Mexico, but nothing could have prepared her for this. The teachers' apartments were right next to the school, if you could call them apartments. The other teachers called them "huts with plumbing," but they were mansions compared to where her students lived.

When Laurie first walked through the door of her own "hut," tears stung her eyes. What was she doing here? What was she thinking? Many of her friends had already "gotten settled" into comfortable American schools, with adequate incomes and nice apartments. They wouldn't think of going without a curling iron for a whole year, much less a coffee maker! How was she going to survive, hundreds of miles from everyone she loved and everything she knew? *"Take my moments and my days ..."*

As she was adjusting to new surroundings, there was a timid knock at her door. Several school-age children crowded into the doorway to get a peek at the new teacher. Within a few weeks, those knocks at the door became daily occurrences. Late afternoon and early evening, the children would come; to visit, for help with schoolwork, and often just to be there. She didn't mind the extra time spent with them. She was already starting to love these kids, their families, and this little village.

Laurie's few possessions were like treasures to them. They held her unlit candles gently in their laps, memorized all the faces in her family portrait, and paged through her paperbacks as if they were able to read them. It was fun to see how her "stuff" delighted them.

Laurie surveyed her homey little apartment. She had packed light for the year, but now many of those "bare necessities" she had brought seemed unnecessary, even extravagant. (And then there's that small mountain of boxes and bins stored in her parents' basement!). *"Take my silver and my gold ..."*

She had given up a lot, especially income, to come here this year. (She began to wonder what on earth she would have done with all that income.) She asked God how to use her wealth in the middle of so much poverty. For the first time, it dawned on her that an understanding of *"Take my silver and my gold ..."* began with the heart.

But there was one thing she never let the children see. At least once a week, late at night when she was all alone, she pulled it out of the back of her closet; her graduation dress, a gift from her parents. It was the nicest dress she'd ever owned, but it was so much more than that: it was the pride of graduation, and great college memories, and home, and her parents' love – all in that one special

dress. It somehow brought her family closer to her, and when she was lonely it reminded her how special she was to them. *"Not a mite would I withhold ..."*

One day, in early spring, Maria knocked on her door. Maria had never come to Laurie's apartment before, although her younger brothers and sisters were there often. Maria was in her teens and worked at the clothing factory in the nearby town. Her income fed the entire family.

Maria's eyes sparkled. She was getting married, in just two months. Laurie hugged her and congratulated her. Then Maria, head bowed, quietly asked Laurie for help. She had brought over a well-worn old dress and a white shawl, and wondered if Laurie could help her sew something special from them for the wedding.

Laurie held up the old garments, and tried to think of something they could design from them. Back home, she'd packed up clothes for the Salvation Army that were far nicer than these. She told Maria they'd try, and Maria should come back Saturday to work on it.

That night she felt particularly lonely. Her college roommate had gotten married the day after graduation, and here she was in Mexico, alone, unattached, and no one waiting back home for her.

So, of course, she reached into the back of her closet for her dress. She hugged it to herself and cried softly, so aware of her emptiness in the middle of her little "Mexican adventure."

As she gently placed it back into the closet, those nagging words popped into her head. "*Take my silver and my gold, not a mite would I withhold....*" She pulled the dress back out and eyed it carefully. Yes, it was the right shade. Yes, it was close to the right size. Yes, it could be temporarily hemmed. Yes, it would be a perfect dress for Maria to use on her wedding day.

Laurie thought of the Psalm that says, "The earth is the Lord's and everything in it...." It started to make sense to her that, if *everything* is God's, then what we have is "on loan" from God, to be gratefully received and generously used. What was "on loan" to her from God could be "on loan" from her to Maria.

Letting Maria use her prized possession as a wedding dress suddenly felt like an *honour* to Laurie. She couldn't wait for Saturday, and the surprise she had for Maria. "*Not a mite would I withhold....*" It was a matter of the heart.

"*Give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar...*" We live simultaneously in God's realm and the human realm, and Jesus calls us to

responsibility in both. Go ahead: pay your sales tax, license your cars, and file an honest tax return. Give to the government whatever it takes to conduct its business. But remember: our *things* as well as *ourselves* belong to God, and are here for the accomplishment of God's purposes.

This is good news for a culture tyrannized by acquisition and materialism. These "things" that consume so much of us are *not* what life is about at all. We are part of something larger than this life. We are part of the kingdom of God, where we matter for WHO we are and NOT for what we have accomplished or acquired.

"... and give to God what belongs to God." Jesus invites us to be free of the tyranny of our possessions, "for where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." When we take this truth to heart, we can begin to separate our need from our greed and become caretakers rather than consumers.

Stewardship replaces accumulation, and our possessions become a means to an end rather than the end itself. "*Not a mite would I withhold....*" Jesus Christ withheld nothing when "he emptied himself and took on the form of a servant ... (to) death on a cross." It is God's way, and now it becomes our way as well.

Laurie joined in the village celebration of Maria and Carlos' wedding two months later, and she was not nervous at all about her dress. From now on, every time she pulled it out from the back of her closet, it would carry even more memories than before. Now it tied together her two worlds, home and Mexico, and the love she felt in both places.

We cannot really give to God what is already God's. But we can release ourselves and our possessions to God's purposes. It's a matter of the heart.

Amen.

PRAYERS of the People
Lent 4, MARCH 19, 2023

Father in heaven, the greatness of your love is beyond words to describe. By the power of Your Spirit, liberate us from all self-centeredness, that we may be free to love others as Christ loves us. God of silence ... **Hear our prayer.**

Lord God of Hosts: Make of us pilgrims throughout these forty days. Lead us through discipline to discipleship, through fasting to feasting, through privation to freedom. Free us from our own struggles, so that we may more fully serve one another. God of silence ... **Hear our prayer.**

Loving Master and faithful friend - help us to be obedient and joyful, humble and caring, merciful and loving. Anchor us in your life-giving word and make us radiant for you - fitting ambassadors of your message of reconciliation. God of silence ... **Hear our prayer.**

God of all mercy- as we work together with Christ, help us to not accept your grace in vain, but to remember that now is the day of salvation, and to call upon you and serve you as you desire. God of silence ... **Hear our prayer.**

God of peace - turn the nations from violence and bloodshed to genuine concern for the common good, and care for the earth we inhabit. God of silence ... **Hear our prayer.**

Compassionate God - nurture the faith of those tested by addiction, grief, anxiety, or illness, and give them a spirit of perseverance and strength for healing. We pray for healing for those recovering from surgery. We pray for your comforting presence to be with the families who have recently lost a loved one ... God of Silence ... **Hear our prayer.**

Bring the healing power of rain where there is drought and dry weather where there is flooding. Drench the earth with your peace,

so that nations and their leaders ensure that all people have access to clean water for all their needs.

God of silence ... **Hear our prayer.**

Satisfy the thirst of all who long for you; the hungry, the poor, the homeless, the lonely, the fearful, that they draw deeply from your well of hope.

God of silence ... **Hear our prayer.**

Faithful God, lead your church that, justified by faith, it may bear testimony to your grace, your power, and your way of life. Bless this congregation so that, showered with the promises of baptism, we welcome those who thirst for you.

God of silence ... **Hear our prayer.**

Shape us and transform us by your grace, that we may grow in wisdom and in confidence, never faltering until we have done all that you desire to bring your realm of shalom to fulfilment.

Amen.

Let us lift the prayer Jesus taught us, saying,**Our Father....**