The Rev. Christine Mendoza
Trinity Episcopal Church
Sunday, October 18, 2026
Matthew 22:15-22

In our Gospel lesson this morning, the set up was nearly flawless, wasn't it? I do love the stories where the Pharisees, priests, and scribes try to trip up Jesus – try to back him into some legal corner – only to find that he deftly side-steps them and says "gotcha!"

And these are smart folks – the Pharisees and the like – they are the best legal minds around. It's not easy to dance out of their verbal traps. But just as soon as you think Jesus is finally caught, he surprises us all with his Houdini-like moves. And the story this morning is like the season finale for this sort of trick. It's Jesus at his most clever, most wily. And for someone like me who loves good courtroom dramas and snappy, clever dialog, it just doesn't get better than this. This time it's the Herodians and the disciples of the Pharisees who conspire to entrap Jesus. At first, they sound like big-money lobbyists seeking to influence a congressional committee chair, offering slavish praise of their target's character: "Teacher," they say. "We know that you are sincere, and teach the way of God in accordance with truth, and show deference to no one; for you do not regard people with partiality."

But Jesus (and we listeners, too) hear all this suspicious flattery for what it clearly is: an attempt to butter him up so he doesn't see the next thing coming. But then it comes: "Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?" Ahhhh…..there it is. This is the point to which all the insincerity was driving. As well as the point of division for the two factions conspiring to entrap Jesus. As agents of Rome, the Herodians favor the tax and may well be lining their own pockets before the revenue gets shipped out of the province. The Pharisees, however, like other Jewish people of their day, resent the tax as well as the idolatrous image of Caesar that was imprinted on the coins required to pay it.

So, here is the conundrum. If Jesus supports the tax, the Pharisees can accuse him of disloyalty to God. If he opposes the tax, the Herodians can charge him with sedition. In other words, it is a classic dilemma of damned if you do and arrested (and possibly killed) if you don't!

Always one to speak in images—typically in the form of parables, but this time taking advantage of a visual aid—Jesus asks about the coin. Then he refuses their framing and offers a different picture, suggesting that God's values are not the same as the world's values. "Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's." Or, as the King James translation puts it best: "***Render unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's and unto God the things that are God's."*** One commentator summarized this lesson: "[Jesus'] statement ends the debate, while leaving an unspoken question hanging in the air. Will we worship the one whose image is stamped on a coin (or on a building, or banner, or campaign poster)? Or will we worship the one who is the very image of [Emmanuel,] God-with-us?"

This points to the most common understanding of this lesson. It is one that sets objects and values of this world in opposition to that of God and God's kingdom. And I don't so much disagree with this understanding, as I think it sometimes can become a touch over-simplified – a bit too obviously dualistic. I suspect that Jesus is even more wily than this – that he might be pointing to an even more complex vision. The older I get, the more I understand reality (both of this world and of God's) as a both-and rather than either-or.

So, what if the point of this lesson is not to set the values of this world in opposition to that of God? What if, by saying "Render unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's and unto God the things that are God's," Jesus is drawing a line more nuanced than this pithy summary might suggest? I believe that setting up a clear dichotomy between material things and divine things is misleading. In our creation story, we hear of God creating the physical world and all the creatures in it and then declaring it good. So, that sets the stage for understanding the things of this world as

also being good. Then we hear of God creating humankind in his own image and declaring that good. So, one could infer that the products of our secondary acts of creation carry with it the imprint of God's image, and thus has the potential to be good as well, albeit also with the potential to be malformed by human sin.

This is a complex argument I am trying to build and attention spans may be short, so I will just cut to the chase. If God created all that is – seen and unseen – and declared it good, how can there be anything in this world that is outside of God? Just what is it that we render unto Caesar and what to God? Isn't all of it really God's anyway? Isn't the real truth of the matter that if we first render to God what is God's – our hearts, minds, bodies, and souls – then whatever we render unto Caesar is merely the outpouring of blessed abundance that we have first rendered unto God?

Now, I know this is tricky stuff. Especially as it is the first Sunday of our annual giving campaign. Normally, the preacher with the unfortunate task of trying to preach the gospel of Jesus while also delivering a compelling "gimme your money" argument usually prefers the story of the Widow's Mite. You remember that one: after the self-important wealthy folks show off how much they can deposit into the Temple treasury, then comes along the poor old widow who drops in the singular small coin, thus giving all that she had in an act of remarkable and formidable faith. Oh, it would be so much easier to preach that on the first Sunday of stewardship!

But here we are with Caesar's coin rather than the Widow's Mite. So, very truly I say to you: Render unto God everything: your hearts, minds, souls, and bodies; your time, talents, and treasure; your very life. And when you do, you will find yourself living a life of such blessed generosity of spirit and fearlessness that you will then joyfully render to the church and to your neighbor all that is needed.

In case you hadn't noticed from the stewardship campaign banner, posters, and pledge cards littered around the church campus or the pledge package you hopefully received in the mail, our theme this year is ***Trinity is ONE: one body, one spirit, one hope***. In the Anglican tradition, we believe that through our participation in the sacrament of Holy Eucharist, we become one body – Christ's Body – because we all share in the one bread and one cup. And then we are sent back into the world to inhabit the reality of the abundance found in God's kingdom. Money is a powerful agent in our culture, and our fears of scarcity often cause us to make idols out of money and the illusion of security it seems to provide. But when we give in sacrifice – when we step forward in faith and render to God what is, indeed, God's – we find we can draw from the living waters of God's economy of grace and providence that flows beneath our fears of scarcity.

In the coming weeks, may we daily give ourselves to God – our selves, our souls, and bodies – so that through our acts of giving to God, each other, and our neighbor, we become a reasonable, holy, and living sacrifice to God. A ***living sacrifice*** – not so much a giving up, but rather a giving over – a rendering. And may our lives become a continual sacrifice to God, so that we may live the life of hope and blessedness that Christ promises – a life that is so rooted in God's abundance that it may transform the world.

Amen.