

Ascension Lutheran Church

Pastor Hollmann's Sermon for the week of October 19, 2008

Belonging to God (Matthew 22:15-22)

Well, it's been a busy week in the news. Monday was Thanksgiving, a national holiday, a time to give thanks to God for all his goodness to us. Tuesday was a federal election: old and new leaders elected. And the rest of the week the stock market went up and down, mostly down. On the news we keep hearing how the economy is in trouble. Given these gloomy money times, it may even seem like there's little to give thanks for.

Last Sunday we celebrated Thanksgiving here in church: a day to reflect how God daily takes care of us. Since then there's been political and economic news. It's fitting that our Gospel reading today from Matthew chapter twenty two has to do with two volatile and ever timely topics: politics and the economy, or political leaders and money. And wouldn't you know it, that rebellious Jesus is right there in the middle of it all.

Perhaps, we should be polite and avoid those pesky topics: stay away from discussing politics and money, just keep the status quo. But Jesus in our Gospel reading today from Matthew shakes up the political and economic order. And this morning he's challenging us about belonging.

During these tough economic times, just who do we and all that we have belong to?

Well in our Gospel reading from Matthew the Pharisees, the religious leaders of Jesus' day, wanted to know who their money belonged to. The same Pharisees who profited from the poor, who took advantage of the downtrodden.

Our Gospel reading takes place during the last week of Jesus ministry. At the start of this week, what we remember each year in the church as holy week, Jesus entered Jerusalem to shouts of praise from the gathered crowds who spread their cloaks and palms before riding this humble king riding a donkey. Children proclaimed: "Hosanna to the Son of David" But the religious leaders felt angry, jealous and threatened.

After entering Jerusalem as king, Jesus goes to the temple and drove out all who were buying and selling in God's house. God's house is a place of prayer, not a money making business. All through that week, Jesus was shaking things up, shattering the status quo and getting on the nerves of the elite.

And so the religious leaders, the one's running the show at the temple, those sitting in places of honour, start to question that popular Jesus. They want to trick him, to embarrass and discredit him. They flatter Jesus: "Teacher" they say, "we know that you are sincere, and teach the way of God in accordance with the truth, and show deference to know one, for you do not regard people with partiality. Tell us then, what do you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor or not?"

Now this is a great question. If you were trying to trick Jesus this is the way to go. In this one

question, politics, economics and God collide. Are you allowed to pay taxes to the emperor or Caesar? This may seem strange to us. After all we don't have an emperor, and we pay taxes to the state. Sounds simple enough: taxes should be paid.

Yet, this question isn't really about paying taxes. The Bible does say that we are to pay our taxes willingly and honestly. But the religious leaders are asking Jesus about who do we really belong to. To whom do we owe our allegiance, our loyalty: to the emperor or to God? Empire vs. Faith.

If Jesus says we should pay taxes to the emperor he's admitting that he supports Rome. Now Rome at this time ruled Palestine. They were the occupiers. And the religious leaders and people hated Rome for taking away their freedom. So, they think, if Jesus says we should pay taxes to the emperor than he's a Roman sympathizer. He's a traitor.

If Jesus says we shouldn't pay taxes, then they got him there to. He would be a traitor then not to the people, but to Rome, to the government. Either way, whether he says yes or no, they got him.

Or so they think. It's a clever question. But Jesus, the very wisdom of God, outwits them. He says to the religious leaders: "Show me the coin used for the tax" They bring him a coin.

Now the coin had the image of the emperor or Caesar Augustus on it. The coin also bore the inscription: Tiberius Caesar (the name of the ruler at that time), son of the divine Augustus, Augustus. Which meant that as far as the Romans were concerned the emperor was not only dictator, but divine. For Jesus and his people there was only one God, the living God. The first commandment in the book of Exodus says clearly there is one God and we are to have no other gods before him.

Jesus makes the corrupt religious leaders bring their own coin, a cunning move, which shows that they have the coin of the supposedly divine emperor. Jesus says "Whose head is on this coin and whose title? The emperor's, they answer." To which Jesus replies, "Give therefore to the emperor what belongs to the emperor. And give to God what belongs to God." Or in the older English version which I learned as a kid: "Render unto Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's."

That coin has Caesar's, the emperor's image on it. His image on the coin signifies that ownership: the emperor owns the coin. It belongs to him. But what about God? What belongs to God? Well that's where it gets personal. Jesus shakes things up. Jesus asks us just who do we belong to?

We belong to God. We bear the image of God. We are created in the image of God. Male and female God creates us in his image, in his likeness. And since we are created in the image of God we belong to God. Since we are created in the image of God we give our lives over to God.

Give to God what is God's. Later on in Matthew chapter twenty two, just after our Gospel reading for today, Jesus tells us very clearly what belongs to God. Another religious expert asks Jesus another question: "Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?"

Jesus says, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: Love your neighbour as yourself. One these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets." This is the heart of what the Bible teaches about following God: it's all right there.

This means that all our thoughts, our abilities, our time, our possessions, our retirement plans, our successes, our salaries, our plans – all belong to God. Give to God what belongs to God. Love your neighbour as you love yourself.

Now we know that when it comes to taxes there are deadlines. Each April, we got to pay. No if, ands, or buts about it. And if we don't the government knows. There are deadlines and penalties if we miss those deadlines. To the government we are a number: a Social insurance number. A number to record, a number that must pay what is owed.

Yet, to God we are not a random number. God knows every hair on our heads. We are created in the image of God. We matter deeply to God. We are not some impersonal number, God knows us by name. God is personal. And God calls us by name.

Soon the religious leaders stop questioning Jesus. He is questioned by the emperor's representative in Jerusalem, Pontius Pilate. He is beaten, mocked, crucified. He dies to give us life. For we are not our own, we were bought with a price. The price being the very life of Jesus, our Saviour, who devotes his heart, soul, and mind to loving us.

We have baptized into Christ's death, raised to the new life of belonging to God in the peace of his forgiveness, and his acceptance of us; raised to new life in the hope of the life to come, raised to new life in the image of Christ, the image of God's love.

God cares and values our ups and downs, our joys and sorrows. God values all of us: heart, soul, mind and strength. In Jesus' image there's a revaluation of our lives. Revaluation of our wealth. It all belongs to God. We all belong to God. Our offering in church is a reminder that all that we have belongs to God. In our offering, we give God back a portion of what he gives to us. We are valuable to God.

Because we are valuable to God, we reevaluate our lives in relation to him and to others.

We love God and give freely to him; we love and serve our neighbours. As Jesus summed up the law and the prophets so succinctly, so sublimely, "Love your neighbour as yourself."

In a world of unstable stock markets and the so often unfulfilled promises of politicians, amidst the ebb and flow of dollars upon dollars, numbers upon numbers, with bills and taxes to pay, in an impersonal city where on a crowded rush hour bus you can feel so alone, God looks at us and sees his image. God sees that we belong to him. God values and cares for us.

God looks at us and sees His own Son Jesus, for we are recreated in the image of Christ, the image of the One who endures; Jesus, the image of God, who comforts us with the reality that we belong to him: that his forgiveness and love belong to us. The same Jesus, who shakes things up and gets our attention, challenging us to give to God what belongs to God. Amen