

Exodus 33:12-23
Psalm 99
1 Thessalonians 1:1-10
MATTHEW 22:15-22

“Give to God what is God’s”

Jesus held up the Roman coin and said to the Pharisee, “Whose is this *image*?” That’s the King James Version translation of this famous question. I ask you to let that word – “image” – stick in your minds for a moment while I give the context of this confrontation.

All of the Gospel stories we have heard and will hear from September 28 through November 23 date from the very last week of Jesus’ life – from Palm Sunday on. Gone are the exciting, novel and relatively carefree days of Jesus and his followers wandering around Galilee as Jesus preached, taught and healed. Jesus is now in Jerusalem, confronting his most bitter and powerful opponents. You could say it was time for the “play-offs,” although spiritually it was as tough as play-off hockey or football, not baseball: and what was at stake was not a mere sports championship. What was at stake was Jesus’ life.

So when a group of Pharisees walked up to Jesus and asked him whether or not it was lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, they were not engaging in some abstract theological or civics class discourse: *they were trying to get him killed*. They figured that if Jesus sided with the patriotic and religious Jewish resistance and said that it was *not* religiously lawful for Jews to pay taxes assessed by their Roman conquerors, the Romans would arrest Jesus and charge him with sedition. However, the Pharisees also figured that if Jesus said that it *was* lawful for Jews to pay Roman taxes, a Jewish zealot might assassinate him as a messianic pretender who was too wimpy to be King – their kind of King.

Of course, Jesus did not answer either “yes” *or* “no”. Instead, he took a life-and-death contemporary question and gave a timeless answer, one with just as much importance for us as for his first hearers.

“Image” means a lot to many people in our time. Some people spend big money, and other spend more money than they can afford, creating, burnishing and maintaining an image of themselves for others to look at. Gotta have a bigger house than ever, a Lexus in the driveway, the biggest plasma TV on the block. Or, perhaps, the kids want to wear Abercrombie and other name brands, so out goes the budget and up go the credit card bills. “Image.” And then too many people idolize celebrities with few or no meaningful accomplishments whose main vocation seems to be shaping, destroying or resurrecting their own “images.”

So I like the old translation of “image” for Jesus’ question, because the word resonates in our time so vividly. Jesus held up the coin, which had the image or likeness of the Roman Emperor: the lifeless coin was *made in the image of Caesar*.

That phrase may sound familiar to us, because it evokes another one including the word “image”, one written long before People magazine was founded.

The phrase is from the Creation story in Genesis 1:26-27: “Then God said, ‘Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness...so God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. God blessed them...’”

[I hold up a quarter dollar.] Whose *image* is this 25cent piece? [“Washington’s.”]

So give to Washington what is Washington’s. **And in whose image are all of us made?** [I hold up a mirror to the congregation.] [God’s.”] So let us give to God what is God’s: our whole selves.

That is the essence of Christian stewardship. Christian stewardship starts with the recognition that we human beings are all made in the image of God. What greater image could there be? How could we possibly be so silly or sinful to blow money on improving our “image” when *at birth* we are already made in the image of God? By being so made, we are all *priceless*. Our *self-worth* does not have to be established by standardized tests, pay grade, house size or any other criteria: our ultimate value has already been established by God. As if our being made in the image of God was not enough, our value to the one whose opinion matters most ultimately – God – was re-stated when Jesus Christ died on the cross for our salvation.

That’s what happened just four days after the confrontation with the Pharisees recorded in today’s Gospel.

Christian stewardship starts with the fundamental biblical truths that our value as individuals has been established by God to be beyond price, so we do not need to make material gains the focus of our lives. Prosperity is O.K.; making that *all* we are about is not. God is the source of our lives, of our skills, of our abilities to make a living and of the air we breathe, the water we drink, the food we eat, the planet we live on. God is the source of our hopes for the future: renewed life here and now, and eternal life in the life to come.

Therefore, our lives can be lived with *an attitude of gratitude*. And gratitude, to be genuine, must take tangible forms, especially because *not only is each of us priceless, but so is everyone else in the world*, including those who the world does not value very highly. Gratitude to God for God’s blessings and a desire to share with others equally loved by God are tangible ways to live out the two greatest commandments: to love God with all our hearts, minds, strength and soul and to love our neighbors as ourselves.

If the financial leaders of our country and of our world had lived by these fundamental truths, the world’s economy would not be in the mess it is now. Instead, a lot of powerful, rich and supposedly smart people took unnecessary and disastrous risks in pursuit of even more money, risks that they expected “somebody else” to pay for it if they didn’t work out. That’s sin, folks. Sadly, many more people got suckered into this fiasco, and far, far more are being affected.

What our country, and the world, need is a dramatic change in values towards these basic biblical principles.

I don’t think the people who led us into this mess get this. And I don’t think it would be wise for us to assume they will – until we, here, along with other like-minded people, lead them there.

We are priceless already, made in the image of God. Therefore, we don't need to shop for items beyond what we can afford for the sake of our "image". If we get this ourselves, we can reinforce this counter-cultural notion among ourselves. We also know that others are priceless, including those who have very, very little money, status or image in worldly ways. Therefore we make provisions **in our own budgets** to love God and love others as ourselves.

That's called making financial pledges.

Yes, it may be harder to make and keep commitments now than a year or two ago. But the measure of a team's heart is not how well it does when all of the players are healthy and it's winning every game with ease: the measure of a team's **heart** is the extra effort of people who work when teammates are down with injuries, the weather's bad and the competition is tough.

Because of the state of the economy, this team called St. Barnabas is facing challenging circumstances like that. Some of our teammates – yours and mine, people who are dependable, contributing teammates – may be out of work, or sick, or both. That means many challenges for them, and if people in such circumstances need to cut back their pledges to the church, that's absolutely fine. There are no minimums here, no fees, no membership dues, unlike many organizations. We all depend on our teammates to pick each other up.

At times like this, it's all the more important for us to be about our mission and ministry as a team. At times like this, it's all the more important for people to have a place to come and a community to participate in where they can be spiritually focused, nourished, supported and strengthened. At times like this, it's all the more important for kids and teens to build strong spiritual foundations for their lives. As I said to our Confirmation class last Wednesday night, if you know you're priceless because you were made by God and are unconditionally loved by God, you have a foundation for your life as strong as cement: if your sense of your own self-worth is based on the money you have –or had – you have a foundation for your life only as strong as Kleenex.

At times like this, it's all the more important for we, the people of St. Barnabas, to be about our mission priorities, including feeding the hungry, helping the homeless, and empowering victims of domestic violence. A week ago 24 members of the St. Barnabas all-ages team made our annual apple pie and apple sale possible. Some "bean counters" might have said we should keep the profits for the expenses of this building, but we act in faith that our people will continue to give to cover the costs of this, our mission headquarters. So, acting in faith, not in fear, all the record profits will go to feed orphaned children in Nairobi, Kenya. And oh yes, the two paper cases full of unsold apples all went to the South Brunswick Food Bank. Nairobi, South Brunswick – hey, it's all family to us.

At times like this, it's all the more important that we be there for those who are seeking to rebuild their lives, like those in the women's shelters in Middlesex and Somerset counties. I took a car load of gifts to a family last week and was given an enthusiastic welcome and thank you on *your* behalf – and another list for another woman. To use a baseball analogy, if you get a reputation as a "clutch performer", you get more at bats, more chances. We came through in the clutch.

Acting from faith, not from fear as a community is grounded in the commitments of the individuals, couples and families who form our community of faith and who act from faith in making financial commitments, one year at a time, to this church. **We make us happen.** Warren Buffet does not come to this church, as you may have noticed, and neither do Tiger Woods, Jon Corzine or any other person with such deep pockets.

We don't have "sponsorships": there is no "PNC Bank Fellowship Room" or "Continental Airlines Welcoming Area." Unlike some churches, we also *do not* depend on endowment income: dividends provide 0.6% of this church's income – not enough to pay the water & sewer bill. We have tenants, but Grace Community Chapel (which worships here at 2 p.m.) and the six AA groups combined produce only 6% of our income. Fund-raising produces 9% of our income, and most of that (including grocery cards) is sales to ourselves. Fully 75% of our budget comes from pledge and envelope offerings. The team depends on the team. And a lot of other people depend on our team, too.

We try to operate as efficiently as we can. For example, there are four heating zones in our building, each with a seven day programmable thermostat, and I am a bit fanatical about conservation. We help the finances of our donors by not taking credit cards, which probably reduces the donations the church gets but means no one ends up paying interest to a credit card issuer on their gifts to the church. We as a church have long-term debt, incurred to build this Sanctuary, Bolmer Room, Welcoming Area, new bathrooms, and the extensive upstairs renovations which gave us our beautiful classrooms. Last **May**, we resolved to **reduce** our debt through the Mortgage Retirement Fund, which *will eliminate the bank mortgage*, leaving us only a 4% loan from our diocese.

So yes, each of us and all of us are living in challenging economic times. But teams with heart step up to challenges, and communities with faith embrace challenges, and people committed to loving God, each other and all those made in God's image **find a way to give.**

We won't be sending out pledge cards for a couple of weeks, so this is a time to pray, ponder and prepare ourselves. If you've never pledged to a church before, please be aware that the Bible teaches *proportional giving*, giving a *percentage* of ones income to charity as a whole and to the church specifically. The traditional biblical standard is the tithe – 10% of income – which some Christians are willing and able to commit themselves to. Others find 5% more sustainable. If you've never pledged before, try 1%.

In any case, try *something* and please remember that *there is no minimum*. Nor are there age limits for 2008, our pledgers ranged in age from 7 to 94. All are welcome.

I have a lot of vivid memories of my mission trip in Kenya in 2007, as many of you know, including of my preaching experience in Holy Trinity Anglican Church of Kenya, Kibera, where I preached about the new hope for saving and transforming lives God offers to people everywhere who are affected by addictions through Alcoholics Anonymous and Alanon. *Thanks to the contributions of the people of St. Barnabas over several years,* there are A.A. and Alanon groups where there never were before in history, which means that people are alive and healthier today who, if not for our generosity, *might be dead.*

But it's not just our generosity that sticks in my mind. It's the generosity of the people in that church in Kibera, the largest slum in East Africa, a vast neighborhood of over 700,000 people crammed into 20 square miles with no running water, no sewer system and very sketchy and limited governmental services.

They don't pass the plate at Holy Trinity, Kibera. Instead, they have a big container shaped like a wood stove placed at the head of the aisle and *people line up in the aisle to put their money in.*

I've looked at their church's budget, and then pledge income, their attendance, and guessed at the incomes, and you know what? As *proportional* givers, they are way, way ahead of us. And their economic situation is comparably worse than ours.

They *know* they are made in the image of God. They give to God what is God's.

Let us follow their example. Let us care, and share. Let these challenging times be our finest hour.

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