

Rev. Dr. Anne B. Epling  
Faith Des Peres Presbyterian Church  
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1 Corinthians 12: 4-13  
Matthew 22: 15-22  
3<sup>rd</sup> in a Series on “Many Members, One Body”

### “Many Members, One Body (Part 3)”

In my sermon two weeks ago I said (something to the effect of), “Wouldn’t it be nice if we (meaning we the Church) were known more for breaking down barriers (that divide us) rather than building them, and not so we can all be the same – but so we can honor God’s gift of diversity by affirming our differences while still remaining one body?”

Last week, I followed up on that thought by posing the question, “But how do we live with differences?” I answered that question by putting forth the idea that while we’re called to work through our differences (to tear down those boundaries), we’re also called to recognize that change in behavior is expected of us. God may love us just as we are, but God loves us too much to let us stay the way we are. Saying, “Let’s all celebrate how different we are!” doesn’t mean that everything is acceptable.

Today, we’re going to take both of those conversations a step further by paying particular attention to what our role is in the body of Christ. In short, how can we – you – me – as individuals – use our diverse gifts in service to God and others? The Apostle Paul says, as you heard Erica say, “There are varieties of gifts, but the same spirit gives them,” and everyone’s gifts are needed. But in a world of competing allegiances, how do we render unto God what is God’s when the Caesars of the world would gladly take all of our time, talents and treasure?”

Along those same lines, in a biography about Benjamin Franklin, the author says that over the years Franklin was guided by one question: “How does one live a life that is useful, virtuous, worthy, moral, and spiritually meaningful?”

That’s not only a good question, it’s a God question. What do I do with what I have, my time, talents and treasure? Seminary professor Walter Wink says every human being asks two questions: in the first half of life it’s “What is the meaning of my life? And in the second half it’s “How can I make a difference with the time I

have left?" Again, in world of competing allegiances, how do we render unto God what is God's when the Caesars of the world would gladly take all of our time, talents and treasure?

This age-old question is at the heart of Jesus' interaction with the Herodians and Pharisees. The question they ask about taxes is just a red herring; and Jesus knows it. The real question is to whom are you going to give your allegiance? Rome, or God?

There was a lot at stake in Jesus' answer for the Herodians and the Pharisees. A lot at stake.

The Herodians were likely pro-Roman Jews. (But) The Pharisees were suspicious of Rome and wanted to keep Judaism as far away from Rome as possible. The two groups couldn't be more at odds with each other. Think of the Herodians and Pharisees as the Nancy Pelosi and John Boehner of Jesus' world; they don't have much in common. But as someone once said to me, in politics (and maybe you could say religion) there are no permanent friendships, only permanent interests, and they had a permanent interest in silencing Jesus because he was a threat to both of them.

If Jesus advocated not paying the tax, Pilate would lose his job because Pilate can't collect taxes if people aren't paying them and that would be bad for Rome and therefore Herodians. And if Pilate loses his job, so do the Pharisees, because he's their boss, and the Pharisees don't want to lose their job, because it comes with a lot of perks. So both groups have a lot to lose if Jesus advocates not paying that tax.

Which they assume he'll do. Because no self-respecting Jew would advocate paying a tax to a government that oppresses him.

But Jesus knows their game, so instead of answering the question like they want him to, he makes them pull out a coin, which only goes to show everyone around how two-faced they are. No self-respecting Jew would be caught dead with a denarius, a coin that proclaims the emperor is divine; good Jews, faithful Jews, paid their tax with a shekel.

Like any coin, the denarius proclaims something about the country that issues it. Coins say something about who and what countries think are important. Think about US coins. (Invite them to pull some out.) Whose face is on it?

Washington, Jefferson, Lincoln, Roosevelt, Kennedy

What are some of the great achievements those men made?

One could say that by putting their faces on our currency, we're stating that we hold those things to be of value.

But what else do we know about those men? Slave holders, adulterers, they led us into war; do we value those things? Probably not.

But the challenges facing people of faith remain just as real, even if they are more subtle than the brazen propaganda stamped on a denarius.

*For one thing*, to be a member of society -- simply to be in the game -- puts me at risk of becoming complicit in society's sins. Chances are good that every time I buy clothes I'm exploiting someone somewhere. My iPhone was designed in the US, but it's made in China. My phone would cost me an extra \$4 if it were made in the US. Am I willing to pay that? If Apple made their phone here, they would have to pay taxes on 35% of their profits; in China, they only pay 2%. Am I supporting that when I use my phone? And what am I supporting? Am I supporting Chinese workers, or the rights of a company to manufacture products where it chooses? Or am I hurting the American worker and economy? These aren't easy questions. Am I rendering unto Caesar?

How many of you are getting a lot of emails from political candidates or causes these days? I'm getting a fair share. When I delete that e-mail, or throw away that piece of direct mail, instead of actively supporting my candidate or cause, am I supporting the other side or person?

I had a good friend in high school who boycotted Coca-Cola because they supported apartheid. It was an honorable thing to do, but did her individual boycott make a difference while I had Tab cans, a Coca Cola, all over the floorboard my car? Henry refuses to eat palm oil, has since going to a day camp at the zoo in the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade, because palm oil production is hurting the rainforest. But the rest of us in the house eat it; are we cancelling out his good work by eating Oreos and Cheese-its when he's away?

My point is, is that we are all caught between giving our lives to God and the long tentacles of injustice. We can try to work for justice, we need to work for justice, but at some point we're all players in the game because we live in a broken world. Try as we might, we can't get away from it. Empires demand our allegiance, and citizenship make us complicit; whether we like it or not, it's hard not to render unto Caesar what is Caesar's, even if we don't like or don't agree with Caesar all that much. There is simply no way to avoid it.

But whatever allegiances we may make with the Caesars of this world, or those who oppose them, those allegiances are only temporary, because our ultimate allegiance is to God first and foremost. Period. No matter how strongly we may feel about our political loyalties or causes, before we are Democrat or Republican, pro-labor or anti-union, environmentalist or not, we are Christian. After all, what really matters isn't whose image is on a coin, but whose image is on us, and that's the image of God, in whose likeness we were created.

If we remember that, all of life takes on greater focus and meaning. No matter what we may do or say, no matter where we may go, no matter what may happen to us, we are first, foremost, and forever God's own beloved child. And that identity will, in turn, shape our behavior, should shape our behavior, urging and aiding us to be the persons we have been called to be.

- Invite them to mark one of their credit cards (or dollar bills if we didn't have a credit card) a cross. Why?
- When you buy something, it will (almost) force you to reflect on whether or not your purchase aligns with your values and God-given identity.
- How is your faith impacting your spending? More importantly, how is your faith shaping your daily life and particularly your economic life? Are you rendering unto Caesar or God? Who is demanding most of your allegiance, Rome or God?
- Are you using your gifts of time, talents and treasure in service to God and others?

Last week we heard that while God loves us just as we are, God loves us too much to stay this way. Today, the rubber hits the road. God wants for us abundant life.

Because while Benjamin Franklin, who I quoted at the beginning of this sermon, may have once said that death and taxes are the only two certainties of this life, each week we have the opportunity to declare that the one who was raised from death shows us that God's love is more certain than anything else.

Amen.

Sources:

John Buchanan, "Love God and Do What You Will", May 2, 2004

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