WHAT BELONGS TO GOD?

Matthew 22: 15-22 10.18.26

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RICHARD SEMMLER – QUIET, PERSISTENT GENEROSITY

Richard Semmler was one of those rare people whose generosity doesn't come from wealth, but from conviction. A math professor at Northern Virginia Community College, Semmler lived most of his adult life with deliberate simplicity: a modest apartment, second-hand furniture, no car, and a habit of eating the same inexpensive meals week after week. None of this was accidental. It was strategy.

Richard decided early in his career that he wanted to give away one million dollars over his lifetime. Not after he became wealthy. Not after retirement. Not "someday." He began giving immediately — often more than half of his income — to shelters, food banks, housing ministries, and international relief organizations. He tutored students for free. He volunteered constantly at the local food kitchen and Habitat for Humanity. And he kept teaching, year after year, because teaching was the engine that fueled his giving.

By the mid-2000s he had donated hundreds of thousands of dollars and eventually, through decades of quiet discipline and, when he died this past January at the age of 80, he had surpassed his goal. He had given more than $1 million to charity. He never sought fame, but his story spread all the way to network television because people were astonished: a man of ordinary means had given away more than most rich philanthropists.

Richard Semmler's life reminds us that generosity is not measured by the size of a bank account but by the shape of a heart. He shows that sacrificial giving is not an act of impulse but a long obedience — a daily choice to live simply so others may simply live.

It seems to me that Semmler's effervescent joy and exuberant generosity would indicate that he understands clearly what belongs to the world, and what belongs to God – the topic to which we turn in this week's gospel lesson.

PARABLE AS PRELUDE

"There was a landowner who planted a vineyard, put a fence around it, dug a wine press in it, and built a watchtower."

That's not the Gospel lesson for this week.

That's the beginning of Matthew's version of the Parable of the Wicked Tenants which comes 14 verses before this week's gospel lesson and which we heard about two weeks ago. In Mark and Luke, it comes immediately before and in all three it provides a context for this week's battle of wits between Jesus and the Pharisees and Herodians.

The landowner in the parable owns the vineyard. He owns the vines, the grapes, the fence, the wine press, and the watchtower. It's all his. The tenants own nothing but the clothes on their backs. They are renters. At the end of the harvest season they owe him half of what they have produced.

That's the context that hovers over this week's gospel lesson, wherein the Pharisees and Herodians, normally bitter rivals, team up to entangle Jesus in a trick question with no right answer, to wit: "Should we pay Roman taxes?" And it hovers over Jesus' response to their question: "Give to the emperor the things that belong to the emperor and give to God the things that belong to God."

It hovers over the question we ask upon hearing this answer: "Okay, what belongs to God?"

And it hovers over us any time we try to figure out whom we should honor, whom we should revere, and to what we should pledge our allegiance.

RENDER TO CAESAR

So, with that story about ownership of the vineyard in our minds, as it was in the minds of the very first readers of this text, let us move to today's NT lesson.

The Pharisees were a religious party and the Herodians were a political party.

The Pharisees were religious and doctrinal purists. They believed that Israel was a separate nation, set apart for God's purpose. They did not believe in mixed marriages between Jews and gentiles. They believed that Jews should not even talk to gentiles and, if they had to, they should bathe themselves before they returned to mingle with other Jews so the contamination would not rub off on others. They believed in a rigorous interpretation of the Torah and rigorous practice of its precepts.

The Herodians believed that it was good for Israel to acquiesce to Rome. They backed the Herods, kings appointed by the Romans to rule Palestine, and they thought that Rome was a gift from God that would ultimately modernize and strengthen God's chosen people, the nation of Israel.

So, it is no surprise that these two groups were usually at each other's throats. They had completely different politics, rules, goals and methods. Not to put too fine a point on it, they hated each other.

But, here, we find them working together. Apparently, the only thing they hated more than each other and feared worse than the Romans was Jesus.

Together, they come up with a trick question that has no acceptable answer, and it is this: Should we pay Roman taxes? Seems simple, right? Straightforward. Yes or no. Or maybe not.

If he says, “yes,” the Pharisees will indict him for pandering to the Romans and encouraging idolatry since Caesar’s picture was on the money.

If he says, “no,” the Herodians will accuse him of treason or, at least, promoting tax evasion.

There is no right answer.

Jesus recognizes what they are doing, of course, so he doesn’t answer the question. Or, he answers their question with a question of his own. “Who has a denarius? Let me see one.” A denarius was about the equivalent of the modern $20 bill and was one of the most common coins in the Roman world.

Someone produces a coin and Jesus looks at it and then asks the BIG QUESTION: Whose picture is on the coin? (I can just see him holding up the coin so they could see it as he talked.

They respond: “The emperor’s.”

Jesus concludes the exchange with a response that is a brilliant mix of rational simplicity and complex irony: “So, give to the emperor what belongs to the emperor, and to God what belongs to God.”

GOD AND COUNTRY

Early Christians would, no doubt, have been stunned and offended if someone suggested that in order to be good Christians they had to pledge allegiance to the Roman Empire.

Despite the mythology that has wound its way through Hollywood’s version of Christian history, the first 300 years were relatively quiet. There was one ten-year period following the Great Fire of Rome in 64 CE during which Christians were persecuted as a result of an emperor’s orders—Nero’s. Other persecutions, however, tended to be sporadic and fairly rare, small, local affairs.

When Christians were persecuted it was usually because they had been accused of incest (they called each other brother and sister) and cannibalism (eating the body and blood of Christ). They usually refused to worship the emperor or consider him to be divine and most refused to serve in the military, though they would sometimes follow the army to battles in order to care for the wounded. There is no record of Christians refusing to pay Roman taxes.

By and large, however, for the first three hundred years of Christian history, Christians were able to live in peace, practice their professions, and rise to positions of responsibility. Then, in about 250 CE, Decius became emperor and required everyone in the empire to go to the temples of the ancient, traditional Roman gods, make a sacrifice, and pray to those gods for the empire and the emperor. Those who did so

would be issued certificates proving their loyalty to the emperor and the empire. Those who refused would be subject to torture and even execution.

Some Christians acquiesced, made the sacrifice, and prayed the formulaic prayer required by the emperor's edict. Many, however, did not. For eighteen months, Christians who refused to pledge their allegiance to the emperor by making a sacrifice and praying for him were subjected to widespread persecution—often torture, execution by decapitation, or death by wild beasts for the amusement of the audience.

Decius was followed by Valerian, who was followed by Diocletian, who was followed by Galerius—all of whom tried, from time to time, to resurrect the cult of the emperor, under which Romans were required to pray to or for the emperor. In each case, some Christians did as they were told, but many others refused.

Among those executed under Valerian were Cyprian, Bishop of Carthage, and Sixtus II, Bishop of Rome with his deacons including Saint Lawrence.

The public examination of Cyprian by the proconsul in Carthage, Galerius Maximus, on 14 September 258 has been preserved:

> Galerius Maximus: "Are you Thascius Cyprianus?"
> Cyprian: "I am."
> Galerius: "The most sacred Emperors have commanded you to conform to the Roman rites."
> Cyprian: "I refuse."
> Galerius: "Take heed for yourself."
> Cyprian: "Do as you are bid; in so clear a case I may not take heed."

Cyprian was taken immediately to a place of execution where he was beheaded.

The sentence was passed down upon Cyprian of Carthage in hopes that it would serve as an example and deterrent to other Christians who were thinking of refusing to bow to the empire.

It did serve as an example but in a way that no one expected.

Not long after Cyprian's execution, a group of Christians presented themselves to the governor of Asia, declared themselves to be Christians, and called on him to do his duty and put them to death. He executed a few, hoping that the spectacle would make the others change their minds, but it didn't work. The rest demanded that they be allowed to become martyrs like their friends. Exasperated, the governor told them: "You wretches, if you want to die, you have cliffs to leap from and ropes to hang yourselves by."

There followed an edict dictating that only those Christians who didn't want to be martyrs were to be executed. Those who wished to be martyrs were to be turned away without exception.

Then, in 313 CE, all the persecutions—the minor local ones and the major national ones—stopped when the emperor Constantine reported seeing a vision of a cross outlined by the sun and immediately issued the Edict of Milan, making Christianity a legal religion within the empire and the persecution of Christians illegal.

Constantine was thereafter a patron and protector of Christianity, but he did not himself convert until just before his death in 337 CE.

Christianity became the official religion of Rome in 380 CE when three Roman co-emperors (Theodosius I, Gratian, and Valentinian II) issued the Edict of Thessalonica, which required all Roman citizens to profess Christianity as their religious faith. (The Nicene Creed, which is in the hymnal, was the result of this mass conversion.)

At that point the empire and the church became virtually one and the same. To be a good Roman you had to be a good Christian, and to be a good Christian, you had to be a good Roman.

Thousands of martyrs who died to keep Christianity out from under the thumb of the government were, no doubt, spinning in their graves. But the Edict of Thessalonica lives on in a more modern form today: a movement within Christianity called White Christian Nationalism now asserts that to be a true American, you must be a Christian, and to be a good Christian, you must be a flag-waving American. Some Christians have discovered that questioning that assertion can bring a great deal of controversy and disdain—and even unemployment—upon their heads.

For centuries, the sentence “Give to the emperor what belongs to the emperor and to God what belongs to God” has been used as a justification for everything from paying taxes to going to war. It has been interpreted as an admonition to do whatever the government requires or requests of us. But it also raises questions. If a directive comes to us printed on the government’s letterhead, are we duty-bound to obey it? If something is allowed by the Constitution, do we have no choice but to allow it?

What, in other words, belongs to Caesar, and what belongs to God? Before we can give a responsible and authentic response to Jesus’ direction, we must ask and answer that question.

Fortunately, Jesus has already answered that question in the parable that precedes this scene. In the parable, the vineyard clearly belongs to the landowner. The vines, the grapes, the wall, the tower, the winepress – they all belong to him. He allows the tenants to farm the vineyard as an act of grace and in exchange for their labor they get to keep half the produce.

But no law says he has to give them half of the grapes. He chooses to do so. He could decide to give them less and, if they didn’t like it they could go find another vineyard to work in. This particular owner, however, is fair, kind, and generous.

But they don't want to give him even the portion that is his due. They want to keep it for themselves and so determined are they that they will commit murder in the pursuit of that end. And it will, eventually, be their undoing.

Clearly, God is the landowner in this story. The vineyard was Israel when the story was first uttered. But time has allowed us to replace Israel with other things: My country, myself, my money, my loyalty, my family, my life, my service, etc. Whatever we insert there, the important thing to remember is that it belongs to God.

In fact, everything belongs to God.

For people of faith, that and that alone will determine how we relate to everything else in our world: our country, our money, our belongings, our future, our family. They all belong to God, regardless whose face is on the coins and whose name is on the letterhead.

AMEN