

"What belongs to whom?"

Psalm 96:1-9 [10-13]

Ascribe to the Lord honor and power. (Ps. 96:7)

¹Sing to the Lord | a new song; sing to the Lord, | all the earth.

²Sing to the Lord, bless the name | of the Lord;
proclaim God's salvation from | day to day.

³Declare God's glory a- | mong the nations
and God's wonders among all peoples.

⁴For great is the Lord and greatly | to be praised,
more to be feared | than all gods. R

⁵As for all the gods of the nations, they | are but idols;
but you, O Lord, have | made the heavens.

⁶Majesty and magnificence are | in your presence;
power and splendor are in your sanctuary.

⁷Ascribe to the Lord, you families | of the peoples,
ascribe to the Lord hon- | or and power.

⁸Ascribe to the Lord the honor due the | holy name;
bring offerings and enter the courts | of the Lord. R

⁹Worship the Lord in the beau- | ty of holiness;
tremble before the Lord, | all the earth.

¹⁰Tell it out among the nations: "The | Lord is king!

The one who made the world so firm that it cannot be moved will
judge the peo- | ples with equity."

¹¹Let the heavens rejoice, and let the | earth be glad;
let the sea thunder and all that is in it; let the field be joyful and all that
is therein.

¹²Then shall all the trees of the wood shout for joy at your com-
| ing, O Lord, for you come to | judge the earth.

¹³You will judge the | world with righteousness
and the peoples with your truth. R

Matthew 22:15-22

The Question about Paying Taxes

¹⁵ Then the Pharisees went and plotted to entrap him in what he said.

¹⁶So they sent their disciples to him, along with the Herodians,
saying, 'Teacher, 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. ¹⁷Tell us, then, what you think. Is
it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?' ¹⁸But Jesus, aware of

their malice, said, 'Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites? ¹⁹Show me the coin used for the tax.' And they brought him a denarius. ²⁰Then he said to them, 'Whose head is this, and whose title?' ²¹They answered, 'The emperor's.' Then he said to them, 'Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's.' ²²When they heard this, they were amazed; and they left him and went away.

'Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's.'

Not the first time that Jesus left the Pharisees and others out to catch him in a conundrum, mystified, astounded, and probably a little bit irritated that they were not able to put him in his place.

They figure they have a surefire way to finally entrap him. The way they see it, it's a yes-no answer. If Jesus says that it is lawful to pay taxes, they can nail him on religious disobedience, as surely everything belongs to God and should be returned to God, as in tithes and offerings. If on the other hand, Jesus says it is not lawful to pay taxes, then the civil authorities can nail him on that front.

But Jesus does neither....yet again, he counters a question with a question – *'Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's.'*

So, not like a politician who speaks forever and says nothing of substance, and usually does not answer the question put to them, Jesus speaks skillfully and profoundly. This isn't just a cute ploy to get out of a particular situation, it shows the depth of Jesus intelligence and wisdom...

So, what does it mean then to „*Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's*”?

Giving to the emperor is the easy part -...yes, we live in a democracy, a constitutional monarchy to be exact, and we don't have emperors any more but rather elected officials, but don't think for a minute that what we live this isn't an empire of some description - the empire of consumerism, the empire of google, to empire of all kinds of forces and interests over which we have very little control.

Giving to the emperor happens all the time - it's called taxes, and fees, and insurances - just try not paying them and you will be reminded of the power of the state in no short orders, and if fees and insurances go unpaid, see how quickly services stop...!

Much more of a challenge is what belongs to God? This is a question that no doubt the Phraisees puzzled over as well, as they were aware of the bibilical imperatives on tithes and offerings. We often say that it all belongs to God, as it is God who created the world, and God who gave us the wherewithall – skills, gifts, opportunities – to earn a living and obtain the success that we have.

There is no question, however, that we usually treat what we have as ours, and ours alone to hoard, to spend, to give away. And yet the Bible has lots to say about our wealth and what we do with it – about 2,000 verses worth – way more than on most other issues that we like to spend our energy on arguing about.

This interchange with Jesus certainly stumped the Pharisees, and continues to stump us today. What is Caesar's, and what is God's?

Next week, as you know, we will be celebrating Reformation Sunday, and we can look at the theme adopted for the celebration of the 500th Anniversary of Luther's radical action in Wittenberg.

The theme for this celebration was "Liberated by God's Grace"

These words go to the heart of the gospel of Jesus Christ and to the soul of the Lutheran Reformation. They are linked to Luther's key insight that helped trigger the Reformation – Christians attain salvation only by the grace of God. We call this justification by faith alone.

"Liberated by God's Grace" has its focus on how the gracious love of God, through the life and ministry of Jesus Christ, opens up opportunities for us as faithful Christians to reach out as healers and reconcilers to a world torn apart by strife and inequality.

We are asking – liberated by God's grace, from what? For what? Your response will reflect the reality of life where you live, but we believe we are called to be responsible citizens in God's world and

good steward's of God's creation. We are freed by the grace of God to engage in this Christian ministry. (LWF)

Three sub-themes:

Human Beings – not for sale

Creation – not for sale

Salvation – not for sale

Human beings – not for sale – and yet, apparently there are more people in slavery than ever before

Creation –not for sale – and yet, is there any free land anymore?

Can we move about freely? Everything and everyone has a price tag

Most recently heard of a new trend – getting sponsors for your wedding, where couples are getting weddings worth over \$100,000 for much less, simply by displaying and mentioning the names of their sponsors. I am not sure whether to be scandalized by their audacity or intrigued by their creativity.

Salvation –not for sale – what have we come to believe about our salvation. Do we really believe our salvation has been won on the cross?

Where have you sold out? Where have we sold out? Who is your Caesar? Where does your heart lie?

So much is taken from us in modernity. Our lives are barely our own. What little is left we guard jealously - our wealth, our time, our love.

Give to Caesar what is Caesar's, give to God what is God's – where in all this soup is God? God does not put a price on our heads, nor does God evaluate our net worth. God simply loves us, and asks of us to give ourselves in love and service to others

In the words of Eric Baretto, Associate Professor of New Testament, Princeton Theological Seminary, writing in the Huffington Post:

When we cater totally to the culture, we are giving to Caesar – and then some. When we pay homage to God and God's desire for us to be in relationship, in community, in faith, then we create a bulwark against consumerism and exploitation.

Jesus' insight is not separating the religious and political. His insight is not splitting the world into two distinct halves. Instead, Jesus' is

facing the political and the personal head on, and calls on us to examine our own hearts. Where do our loyalties truly lie?

¹The Lord is king; let the people tremble.

The Lord is enthroned upon the cherubim; let the earth shake.

So, yes, let's give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God. And let how we respond to that saying reflect our deepest commitments. And let's not forget that when Jesus spoke, he was speaking with a political voice that eventually led to his unjust death and ultimate resurrection. That we miss Jesus' sharply political teachings says more about us than him.

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and God's wonders among all peoples.

Let us be about the singing of that new song, bathed in God's love and grace. Amen.