

Giving to God

Scriptures: Psalm 99: 1-5, 9

Matthew 22: 15-22

“Is the earth round or flat?” “Is smoking good for your health?” “Is the Pope Catholic?”

Don't you wish all of life's questions were this easy to answer? Unfortunately, as we all know, they're not. Life is not always just a question of yes or no, of black or white, of right or wrong. It's often a lot more complex than that, with no easy answers to be found. In fact there are many dilemmas facing us in life, time and time again, situations that any way we respond to them get us caught in something which becomes more complex and difficult with each new step we take

If I go to the dentist, as I should, she may find I need a root canal, and then I'd have to go through the pain of getting my tooth drilled. But if I don't go, and let some problem with my tooth go on, it may end up getting abscessed and being that much worse than if I'd just gone in the first place. What should I do? There's no way out without pain.

If I pay my rent and other bills on time, then I may not have enough money to buy food this week if I'm on a very limited income. I have to eat, and my family has to eat. But if I don't pay my rent, I may get evicted, and have no roof over my head. My family and I would be homeless. What should I do? I'm damned if I do, damned if I don't.

If I spend time helping a friend who's in trouble I won't have the time to spend with my family this week. But my kids are getting 60's on their tests at school and need help with their homework, and my spouse needs my attention, energy and emotional support. So if I focus my energies at home, what happens to my friend? Do I sacrifice one for the other? Someone's bound to get short-changed, and will end up feeling slighted and hurt by me.

These are just a few examples of dilemmas that can face many of us in our own life settings. They're difficult to deal with, and when we get ourselves involved in several of them simultaneously, we may just want to duck and run for cover. Have you ever had a week like that?

The question posed to Jesus by the Pharisees in today's New Testament lesson from Matthew's gospel placed him on the horns of a dilemma as well. Whichever way he answered it, he'd be in trouble. The Pharisees knew this full well, and that's precisely why they posed it to him this way, to trip him up and discredit him in front of the crowd. On the one hand, if he answered “no,” that it was not lawful to pay taxes to Caesar the Emperor, the Herodians were right there listening in, King Herod's right hand men, and they'd see to it that Jesus was arrested on the spot for sedition and disloyalty to

their Roman overlords. Yet if Jesus answered “yes” to the question, that the Jews should indeed pay taxes to Caesar, then the Jewish nationalists and zealots in the crowd would immediately brand Jesus as a Roman collaborator and a traitor to his people. Either a “Yes” or a “No” answer would land Jesus right in the trap of the dilemma the Pharisees had structured for him. And that’s exactly where they wanted him to be.

Now do we really think Jesus would have been so simple-minded as not to have seen this coming? Of course not. We know that Jesus was more wily than that. He knew what the Pharisees were up to, that he had offended them time and time again by calling them a “*brood of vipers*,” usually casting them in a bad light by the parables he told the crowds. He knew they’d just been laying in wait for him, and now they’d finally found their chance.

So he dodges their trap by giving an answer that confounds them. “*Show me a denarius*” he says to them. When they fetch one, he takes it and turns it heads up. “*Whose head is this?*” he asks them. “*The emperor’s*,” they respond. Every coin in the ancient world was stamped with the ruling monarch’s likeness. “*Then give to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and give to God the things that are God’s.*”

The text says that when they heard this, the Pharisees and Herodians were “*amazed*.” “Confounded” might be a more appropriate translation of the original Greek text, or “baffled.” Jesus had not only foiled the plot of the Pharisees, but had blown their circuits in the process. For they were highly religious people, who felt loyalty to God was their first and foremost responsibility.

So what *was* Jesus saying to them? Pay the tax or not? Were the two answers presented mutually exclusive? If you pay your tax can you also be giving what is due to God as well? The Pharisees, I’m sure, went home that day and debated this. And people of faith have been debating it ever since. Where does the dividing line lie between what is Caesar’s and what is God’s? How are we to tell? How can we separate church and state, the sacred from the secular in our lives? Jesus’ enigmatic answer to the Pharisees’ question leaves us pondering a dilemma 2,000 years later: If it belongs to the secular realm, can it be sacred? If God indeed is the creator of everything, is there anything that doesn’t belong to God?

In his commentary on the passage, Charles Cousar says: “*At one level Jesus’ response is clearly evasive. He successfully escapes the trap laid for him. He does not answer the query directly, but throws the issue back on the audience, who will have to decide for themselves where to draw the line between the emperor’s jurisdiction and God’s jurisdiction.*”¹ By making it up to us to decide this question, Jesus has made it a live issue for all times. If it’s not decided once and for all, then it must be decided again and again, according to each situation in which we find ourselves.

500 years ago, John Calvin, the great theologian of the Protestant Reformation to whom we Presbyterians look as the founder of our Reformed Protestant branch of Christianity, wrote in his Institutes of the Christian Religion on the role of government in

carrying out the will of God on Earth. If a government is responsible to its citizens, he said, if it upholds justice and equality for all, then it's acting as an agent of God's will in the world. For as in the words of Psalm 99, Calvin believed that God sits enthroned in heaven as a "*Mighty King*," who loves justice and has established equity in the world. The government, in this case, is fulfilling its responsibility, and should be obeyed and supported by its citizens. That means you and I are going to pay our taxes and abide by the laws, according to Calvin

But, if a government shirks its responsibility to act fairly as God's agent of justice and equity, or if it flagrantly violates these principles laid down by God in our Scriptural heritage, then we as citizens of the state actually have a right and a duty to protest, and not to obey a secular government which is disregarding its divine mandate. For ultimately, and this is something which Jesus didn't directly say to the Pharisees that day but which in other times and places he did assert, God and Caesar are not equals. The person of faith owes their allegiance ultimately to God, and only pen-ultimately to the state. Calvin affirmed this perspective on the sovereignty of God when he said that we are to obey the state only so long as it obeys God, the maker of the world and everything in it. As the psalmist wrote, the "*Lord our God is holy... let the people praise your great and awesome name!*"

The issue of God's primacy certainly has been the grounds for lots of debate, discussion and disagreement over the five centuries since John Calvin, Martin Luther and the other Protestant Reformers wrote their treatises. Next Sunday we'll celebrate Reformation Sunday, which this year marks the 500th anniversary of Martin Luther nailing his 95 theses to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg, Germany. As Presbyterians we are the theological descendants indirectly of Luther but directly of Calvin. We state in our Book of Order that "*God alone is Lord of the conscience*," and that matters of conscience are between the believer and God, that the individual is ultimately accountable to no one but God, and that the state has no business trying to interfere in the matters of spirit.

But let's return to the New Testament text for today. Depending on the particular situation, Christians over the centuries have interpreted Jesus' statement to the Pharisees in diverging ways. Sometimes they've understood it to be calling them to obey their government and to see it as "God's agent in the world," acting on God's behalf. At other times they've seen Jesus' words as a call to civil disobedience, when they perceive the state to be ignoring or working against God's will. Whose interpretation is correct depends upon the situation, and this is why it continues to be a live issue for us even today.

So what is your perspective on the government we have today that is supported through our federal income taxes? Are President Trump and Congress carrying out the legitimate function of government, ensuring the protection of the nation and the environment in which we all live, and the equitable distribution of its resources? Or are they not? Are they being responsible stewards of the role God, in Calvin's eyes, has entrusted to them? Or are they being derelict in their duty, and not worthy of their

citizens' support?

This is just one example of the issue as it effects us in the USA today. What about all the other places in this world and in our lives in which the issue of our loyalties and priorities comes to play? What I find most helpful in this consideration is to stop and think for a moment about how we value human beings. We each have been created in the likeness of God. God's image is there in each and every one of us, much like Caesar's image was imprinted on the coins issued under his authority. We each bear God's image, as the Bible says in Genesis, Chapter 1, and so ultimately, we each belong to God. And if we believe this, then our priorities and decisions should reflect our belief. As Christians we should support those efforts which build up God's realm on earth, which advocate the fair and equitable distribution of God's resources to all God's children, which protect the environment and enhance the quality of life for all human beings, and which give glory to God through the responsible stewardship of the planet itself.

God has given us so much, and has entrusted us with the management of so many resources. Over the next several weeks you will be hearing from the Stewardship Committee about why you should support this church with your time, talent and financial resources. As we make our choices for how we invest ourselves in 2018 let's keep asking ourselves that age old, open-ended question: do the choices we're about to make with our money, our time and our talent reflect our confessed belief that God is ultimately the owner of all we have? And then, acting faithfully as stewards of the resources entrusted to our care, let's give to the state, to the community and to God what we ought to give, as we seek to make this the world more like the one God intends it to be.

Amen.

1. Charles Cousar in Texts for Preaching: A Lectionary Commentary Based on the NRSV-Year A, John Know Westminster Press, Louisville, KY, c. 1995, p. 532