

October 18, 2020 Chapel by the Sea Worship via Zoom

**Matthew 22:15-22**

***Missing God***

**A sermon by The Rev. Dr. Flatley**

After three parables aimed at the Pharisees Jesus is now the target of their questions. This first question comes from an unlikely coalition of Herodians and Pharisees. The Herodians as their name implies supported Herod, the King of Galilee and they are pro-tax.

The Pharisees on the other hand support a theocracy where God is sovereign and they were not in favor of paying taxes to foreigners. What brought these two groups together? Jesus! But not out of love for him. Based on how Jesus would answer their trick question they were sure they could discredit him in front of his own disciples and amongst the king's men. If Jesus answered in favor of paying taxes to Caesar the Jewish people would be disenfranchised and feel abandoned by Jesus. If he answered don't pay Caesar's tax he would have been reported to the authorities and arrested for sedition and tax evasion. The co-conspirators thought they had him cornered with their question, "Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor or not?" Jesus doesn't say, "I don't know" he answers their question with a question.

A few Sundays ago in Matthew 21:23 the chief priests had asked Jesus by what authority he was doing these things? There too he answered their question with a question, "Did the baptism of John come from heaven or was it of human origin?" The chief priests answered, "We do not know". They gave the safe answer to protect themselves.

Jesus diffused this politically charged question about paying taxes and gives a wise answer and teaches us something about Christian ethics. The question asked of him is about interpreting the law, is it lawful? The tax in question is the tribute tax. This was a poll-tax based on the census gathering to be paid by every adult. A special coin had to be used to pay the tribute tax called a *denarius*, the equivalent of a day's wages. Jesus asked to see the coin.

Jesus points to the fact that Caesar's face is stamped on the coin. An inscription in Latin read, "Tiberius Caesar, august son of the divine Augustus, high priest" To the Pharisees such an image on a coin was sacrilege, idolatrous, breaking Commandments One and Two.

Jesus' answer is to give to the Emperor what already is his! This teaching did not go against the Torah teachings. The Pharisees had been living in such an economy since the Roman occupation (63BC) and while they resented paying taxes the Pharisees themselves were also in the business of taxing people who came to the temple. Jesus rightly called them, hypocrites!

Jesus then added to his answer, "And give to God the things that are God's". For Matthew those things are obedience and righteousness.

As dual citizens of heaven, a life hereafter, and citizens on earth, our life here and now, we must strike a balance between worldly things and divine things. The commandments teach that God comes first. God alone is sovereign. That's where our higher allegiance lies. For Matthew this is the higher righteousness. As dual citizens we are *in* the world but not necessarily *of* a world that rejects God, We are of a world that rejects obedience to God's commands, some of us won't even obey civil law or state laws that require us to wear masks during this pandemic.

Every situation we will ever face is not described in Torah nor is it described in the Bible but knowing Jesus teachings, knowing the commandments, the golden rule, the rule of Christ, the greatest commandment, all these key teachings help us discern the higher righteousness that Matthew is writing about here. We are to act in obedience with those teachings and then we are doing God's will.

One example in the news this week was the report that many in the current administration notified certain stock brokers and hedge fund managers that Covid would be deadly in advance of making that information public. So while that information was kept from the general public it gave hedge managers an advantage on how to trade and make money from this pandemic. Is it lawful? It

certainly is not considered ethical. As followers of Christ we are called upon to make these types of decisions throughout our lives and we base our ethics on Jesus teachings and whose we are. We belong to God. We are made in the image of God, *imago dei*. God's image has been imprinted on us and sealed in baptism with its own special watermark in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, the triune God.

The same God who cares for us and loves us as described in these words from Isaiah 49:15-16 "Can a woman forget her nursing child?...Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you. See I have inscribed you on the palms on my hands." The same God described in the familiar words of John 3:16 which tell us that God loved us so much that God sent God's only son...

If we are missing God it may be because God's image in us has been covered over and needs to be uncovered. As Celtic Spirituality teaches us in the words of John Philip Newell, "the image of God can be seen in every newborn child and that, although obscured by sin, it exists at the heart of every person, waiting to be released through the grace of God."

Jesus commends to us our free will and our own conscience to make wise decisions based on his teachings. If we are to have the mind of Christ and obey his commandments then in our love of righteousness we must love God, love self, love others and love our enemies. This is the higher righteousness.

Amen.

Newell, J. Philip, *Listening for the Heartbeat of God*, Paulist Press, New York, NY, 1977