

Proper 24A
Peace, Seattle
October 19, 2014 epk
Matthew 22:15-22

TO GOD'S WHAT IS GOD'S

It was Sunday, and the pastor climbed the steps into the pulpit, as he did every week at the church in the town where he served. But this time, what he had to say would reach far beyond his congregation and far beyond the community of which he was part.

The date was June 23, 1940, the day after France signed the Armistice with Hitler's Germany. The Pastor was Andre Trocmé, and the town was Le Chambon, a village located on the Vivarais Plateau in south-central France.

After asking all to humble themselves before God and take responsibility for the actions and inactions that had led to their country's crisis, Pastor Trocmé called on his flock to [quote]

“gather resolutely around Jesus Christ...and embrace his Gospel, and only his Gospel, as our source of inspiration, obedience and action.”¹

Referring to “the totalitarian ideology” of Nazi Germany, Trocmé said:

“It is the duty of Christians to resist the violence directed at our consciences with the weapons of the spirit. We appeal to all our brothers in Christ to refuse to agree with or cooperate in violence... To love, to forgive, to show kindness to our enemies, that is our duty. But we must do our duty without conceding defeat, without servility, without cowardice. We will resist when our enemies demand that we act in ways that go against the teachings of the Gospel. We will resist without fear, without pride, and without hatred.”

It was a courageous and timely sermon, and one that set the tone for how that parish and indeed, the entire plateau, would respond in the coming weeks & months, as ordinary folk like you and me took in, protected, and harbored Jewish children, families, and individuals who were fleeing their native countries and the occupied areas of France itself.

By the time the war was over five years later, not a single one of the estimated 3,500 Jewish refugees who found their way to Le Chambon and the other villages of the largely Protestant Plateau during WW 2, were ever betrayed into the hands of German or French Vichy authorities—a singular record of action unequalled by any community anywhere in Europe during the war.²

Toward the end of his book *The Greatest Escape*, which details the story of what took place in and around Le Chambon, author Peter Grose asks whether we, in the 21st century, possess the courage, tenacity of will, and conviction of conscience to mount a resistance movement such as what took place there.

Something like his question is hanging over our gospel lesson this morning.

If ever there was a text that intersected with our lives and our choices as citizens, this text from Matthew is it.

- Property taxes are due this month;

¹ This quote and the following one are excerpted from Peter Grose, *The Greatest Escape*. (London: Nicholas Brealey, 2014), p. 307 and 308. It is a remarkable read, of a remarkable story, and Le Chambon was one of the most powerful places I and my family were privileged to visit last May when I was on a pastoral sabbatical.

² Ibid.

- And as the countdown to election day continues, the question of which initiatives will prevail and how their passage would impact state funding resources is hotly debated.
- On top of that, it's offering of letters Sunday and we're exercising our dual responsibility as citizens of God's Kingdom and citizens of our country by taking stances and writing to our representatives on issues that impact hungry neighbors and refugees around the globe.

In the midst of all this comes the question directed at Jesus in today's gospel:

IS IT LAWFUL TO PAY TAXES TO THE EMPEROR, OR NOT?

It's a trick question. A carefully composed question. One that goes to the heart of where one's ultimate allegiance lies. It's an election year kind of question calculated by his opponents to put Jesus in the hot seat by forcing him to take a side in their national debate.

As we discovered last week, only days before, Jesus had come riding into Jerusalem and the crowds had gone wild! They were all lining up behind the guy they thought might be the next King David.

And the first thing he did was turn the Temple Market upside down.

The uproar caught the attention of the powers that be, for these were revolutionary acts:

The one against Roman rule, the other against the religious tradition.

The Pharisees and chief priests wanted to arrest Jesus in the worst way, for time after time, he'd called into question everything they stood for.

The Herodian party was nervous for other reasons. Like the Vichy government in wartime France, they'd accommodated themselves to Roman Rule and didn't want Jesus to upset an arrangement that suited them quite well, thank you.

Meanwhile, ever present in the shadows was the clandestine **Zealot party**; revolutionary patriots who considered Rome and everyone who appeased Rome, to be mortal enemies. They let their knives and swords do the talking.

Matthew tells us that Jesus so captivated the masses with his teaching and power to heal, that his enemies couldn't get at him directly. So they went after him INDIRECTLY.

Joining forces, Pharisees and Herodians sent surrogates to Jesus armed with an airtight strategy. **WE'LL HIT HIM WITH THE TAX QUESTION, they thought. It was the perfect trap.**

Keep in mind, now, that Israel's tax situation back then was not at all like ours.

Though we may disagree about the amount of taxes we ought to pay, most of us would agree that programs like Social Security, Medicare, Veterans Benefits, public education and public safety are worth supporting.

And most of us would agree that if we want these benefits for ourselves and our communities we ought to be willing to contribute our fair share to keep them going.

But for people living under the thumb of Roman rule, the question of taxes went much deeper. Christ's questioners knew Caesar had the power to tax, but they also believed this authority conflicted with God's law. So for the faithful Jew, the primary question was not, **HOW MUCH SHOULD WE PAY? But rather SHOULD WE PAY TAXES AT ALL?**

The money for the tax was specially minted by Rome, just for this purpose. This coin, a denarius, bore the image of Caesar and it claimed that Caesar was divine—a claim deeply offensive to any self-respecting Jew.

The tax coin was a piece of propaganda at best and idolatry at worst, because it made the emperor equal to God. Not only that, forced taxation was one of the empire's standard methods of flexing its military muscle and exerting an ever-stronger grip on its subjugated peoples.

So, do you see the dilemma?

If Jesus says, YES—IT'S LAWFUL TO PAY TAXES TO THE EMPEROR, he would, in the eyes of many, be acknowledging the emperor's claims to divinity and affirming Rome's despotic rule.

On the other hand, if Jesus says, IT'S NOT LAWFUL TO PAY TAXES TO CAESAR, he would be pitting himself against not only the Roman authorities and their political operatives like Herod and Pilate, but against all the people who paid the tax out of fear or expediency or carefully reasoned conviction. **There could be no way out of this trap.**

SO, JESUS, TELL US...IS IT RIGHT TO PAY TAXES TO CAESAR OR NOT?

Jesus knew all about conflicting claims. He'd gone through the gauntlet himself in the wilderness. So Jesus, as he so often does, turns their question into an occasion for calling all of his listeners into a deeper commitment to God.

IS IT LAWFUL TO PAY TAXES? They ask.

**WELL, he says, SHOW ME THE COIN. WHOSE HEAD AND TITLE IS THIS?
THE EMPEROR'S, they answer.**

**THEN GIVE THE EMPEROR WHAT BELONGS TO THE EMPEROR...
AND GIVE TO GOD WHAT BELONGS TO GOD.**

Do you see? Jesus' answer puts the ball right back into their court (and ours), by raising the question: WHO IS THE ULTIMATE AUTHORITY IN YOUR LIFE?

If our answer is anything other than GOD, then we've just been caught in the act of idolatry.

When we are baptized, the name inscribed on our foreheads and etched on our hearts is Jesus Christ, Son of God, Savior. **It is he who gives us NEW BIRTH in the waters of baptism—and it his image and likeness we bear!**

God's mark on us, God's claim on us is indelible. But it doesn't stop there... For this inward identity, you see, has an outward trajectory. We have been created for a purpose; called by the Spirit into community for a purpose. Our faith in Christ—though always personal—is never meant to be private. We are ever called to engage the issues that face our communities, nation, and world as citizens of God's kingdom.

Turn to Evangelical Lutheran Worship, page 237.

In the Public affirmation of baptism, the question is put to us:

Do you intend to continue in the covenant God made with you in holy baptism: (read with me...)

- To live among God's faithful people,
- to hear the word of God and share in the Lord's Supper,
- to proclaim the good news of God in Christ through word and deed,
- to serve all people, following the example of Jesus,
- and to strive for justice and peace in all the earth?

Then comes the response: I DO, AND I ASK GOD TO HELP AND GUIDE ME. (repeat)

This covenant is deeply personal, for it commits us to a way of being and acting in the world that (when we take it seriously) will affect our lives daily. But there's nothing private about it at all.

The Christian vocation we're yoked to when we are yoked to Christ is a vocation of taking our faith public, of putting our love of God and love of neighbor out in the public square. And in doing so, we take great care in discerning how God might be calling us to respond to THIS particular social issue or THAT particular ethical question at THIS particular moment in time.

It's not about THIS HERE BELONGS TO THE CAESAR (however defined) and THIS OVER HERE BELONGS TO GOD. God does not call us to live two separate lives, one on SUNDAY and the other during the rest of the week, but rather to bring our whole life, all we are and all we have under the claim that Jesus, not Caesar, is Lord.

In Le Chambon, that meant resisting the forces that would do harm to the neighbor through concrete acts of Christian hospitality—even when those acts put the actor's own livelihoods, indeed their lives, at risk.

The most challenging part of Jesus' answer this morning is not:

GIVE TO CAESAR THE THINGS THAT ARE CAESAR'S.

The most challenging part is:

GIVE TO GOD THE THINGS THAT ARE GOD'S.

For this is nothing less than a call to build our whole life, public and personal, working and retired, young and old, on the bedrock of our identity as baptized children of God, on the fundamental benchmark of Christ's life and death and resurrection.

Far from settling the question of what, in any age, belongs to Caesar and what belongs to God, this passage keeps the question perpetually alive. Yes, in every age, in every circumstance, in every place, we must keep on asking what belongs to the civil authority and what belongs to God.

"Give to God the things that are God's" is the tallest order I can imagine.

The only way to get after it is one day at a time. Together. Amen.