

+Death and Taxes

Psalm 96 1 Thessalonians 1:1-10 Matthew 22:15-22

One of the founders of the United States was quoted as saying something to the effect that: "There is nothing certain but death and taxes." I know that is a bit of an overstatement, well, more or less, but there is a great deal of truth in it. And some things never change; no one says "oh, can I pay MORE taxes?"

Even in Jesus' time, taxes were a fact of life. In fact, one of the reasons that tax collectors were so hated is that they made their living by over-charging the people on their taxes and keeping the difference. So, as if paying taxes wasn't bad enough, you knew you were overpaying and the tax collector was keeping the rest. If they lived well, you knew who was paying for it! And you didn't dare NOT pay taxes, because during the Roman rule, paying taxes was more than just a civic duty, it was a sign of allegiance. Not paying your taxes was about the same as taking up a sword against Rome. That was an important understanding when the Pharisees and Herodians approached Jesus with their rhetorical question.

To begin to unpack our story today, we have to start by realizing that they are not seeking an answer...they are hatching a plot to trap Jesus. Jesus was already a little too popular and the questioners were afraid. Afraid in part that if the crowds got too rowdy, the Romans would crush them all. They were afraid of Jesus as well; his teachings and actions were radical challenges to the calm norm they preferred.

So, the trap works like this: Ask Jesus about paying taxes to Caesar. Simple question, yes or no. But not so simple to answer. If Jesus says yes, he sounds like all of the other powerful individuals who accommodate Roman rule. Self-serving, self-promoting...just another TV preacher in pre-TV days. HOWEVER, if he says no, then he is a revolutionary, a sure ticket to execution.

Jesus' response was a common one, answer a question with another question. "Show me the coin" ... Aha! Gotcha. No faithful Jew would carry a coin around that had the graven image of Caesar on it! Caesar considered himself a god and the coins were minted with his image were anathema to the good Jews. No righteous Jew would carry around the graven image of a petty would-be god! Yet the questioners had one. Hmmm...interesting!

And then, of course, we come to the most famous part of this teaching, as Jesus pronounces, "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's." Simple, tidy, insightful and beyond rebuke. Give to Caesar that which is Caesar's and to God that which is God's.

But, hang on, the story ends there without answering the one question we are afraid of asking: Just what IS God's? It's easy to tell what the Caesar's part of this equation is all about, but what about God's?

You see, it is easy AND A MISTAKE to assume that Jesus is dividing the world into the secular and the sacred. You and I have heard that far too often. Separation of Church and State we call it in the US; when it's more really separation of Church FROM State, but that's another sermon. And, in all honesty, we really don't want our religions and our politics to get too entangled, do we? At least not if the interpretation of religion is different than what we believe or radical in its implications. Or, as in the current case with the I.S., it comes at too high a price, unwillingly paid.

But still, we need to be asking the other half of this question: What belongs to God if not the world and everything in it? What, then, is left to give to Caesar? To Jesus there was only one kingdom, only one king. We have to ask ourselves: What would it cost us to view the reign of God in the same way?

In the Epistle reading for today, Paul is writing to the Greek Church in 1 Thessalonians 1:1-10. He wrote, in part, "You became imitators of us and of the Lord when you accepted the message that came from the Holy Spirit with joy in spite of great suffering. As a result, you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia."

In today's world being praised as an imitator is normally considered an insult. We want to be "unique individuals" ...just like everyone else! We hate the idea of being a copy of anything or anyone, even though we spend untold millions on replica or authentic jerseys, sporting gear endorsed by top-name athletes, clothing modeled by the most popular or wealthiest or most famous of our society. We live in a time when people can become rich and famous for simply being rich and famous...think of Paris Hilton or the Kardashians.

In fact, it's hardly a surprise that advertisers count on the fact that we will catch the desiring behaviors that are being put on display precisely for us to imitate. We are all, to some degree or other, moved through our day with a desire to imitate. There is even a study in science, called Mimetic Theory that studies our desire to imitate.

Mimetic Theory hypothesizes that it is not a matter of whether we imitate the desires of others; it is only a matter of whose desires we imitate. When we are born, we imitate our parents. We pick up mannerisms, language, and body language, the ability to walk... all through imitation. When I look at Sue or her sisters, I can occasionally see her parents in her actions or mannerisms. When I least expect it, I open my mouth and hear my father talking! For many of us, more complex learning may require us to go to school or undertake apprenticeships as a means of learning by imitation. In each of these instances, we are learning by imitating.

Of course, since we are literally creating ourselves with our imitating, it becomes important WHO we are imitating. Is it any surprise that in the so-called Islamic State, fathers are expected to bring their sons with them when they join? I suspect that there are people in your lives that you have intentionally learned to imitate. We call them role models, or mentors, but ultimately, they are those who are worthy of imitation. And, in the same light, there are people or actions we intentionally chose NOT to imitate. How many young parents have I heard saying something like, "I will never treat my kids the way I was treated" or some such?

The worst are parents who want to be "friends" not "parents"...If you won't be a parent, if you are not willing to be a role model and guide to your kids, your kids will find someone else to imitate: Perhaps a good choice, or perhaps a bad one, but they WILL most likely end up imitating someone.

Paul understood that when he affirmed the young Greek church, "You became imitators of us and the Lord...as a result you became an example to all the believers..."

Now keep that in mind and let's go back to our reading from the Gospel for today. In it, Jesus is challenging us to imitate God.

When Jesus asked his questioners about the “image” on the coin, he used a word that would recall for most Jews a central tenet of their faith: That human beings are made in the image of God. That’s important...we are made in God’s image. With that in mind, his response, “give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God” is really saying something more like, “that coin has Caesar’s image on it, so you can give it back to Caesar. YOU are made in God’s image, so give your entire self to God.”

In his response, Jesus avoids the trap set for him by the Pharisees with a veiled reference to our need to imitate God. That is the key component of our faith and the reason why the salvific nature of Christ is central to our faith...we are called upon to imitate God; God as we see God made manifest in Jesus Christ.

In your life, give the company what is due the company. Give the state what is due the state. But you were created in the image of God. Paul affirmed the church saying, “You became imitators of us and of the Lord...as a result you became an example.” You are made in God’s image, so give your entire self to God. Made in God’s image, we are creatures with the ability to imitate God’s desiring Love that has shown itself on the cross. Made in God’s image, we witness the Holy Spirit alive and well and active in the world around us. Made in God’s image, we are called upon to imitate God’s love and live it as an example to others.

With the image of Caesar (or the king) in your hand, give to Caesar that which is Caesar’s. BUT YOU were created in the image of God. Give to God that which is God’s.