

Is it a coincidence that we hear Matthew's famous "Render unto Caesar" passage just after October 16th, the last day our taxes could be paid. Preparing for and paying taxes can make a person grumbly. It's a required annual investment of our time, our organizational skills, and sometimes our checkbook. Even if we willingly render to the government what is theirs so that we may receive the goods, services and safety those funds provide, most of us at one time or another has likely wished we didn't have to file taxes, or felt frustrated about it.

Today's passage isn't really about paying taxes, anyway. But the scene in this week's Gospel *is* high drama worthy of a favorite streaming series**, because at the heart of it, is a question of the heart: What do we render to God, and what gets in the way of our doing so?

Jesus is in Jerusalem, on temple grounds, when the Pharisees and Herodians approach. The Pharisees — religious leaders who have little civic power — have joined with the Herodians, a group that generally supports the ruler of the land. The two groups don't really agree on much, except on one thing: *Jesus is trouble*. So, with this shared opinion, they conspire together to entrap Jesus.

As they approach Jesus, they lead with overt flattery.

"Teacher, We know you are sincere, speak truth, and are impartial",

I would bet that many of us have experienced false flattery — whether from our children who are trying desperately to get their way, (Mom, you are the best mom in all the world! And...) or from folks who begin a conversation with platitudes about how awesome we are. They seem to be sincere, and our egos really want to believe that they are, that there is no hidden agenda. Yet something within us senses something is up — that their motives aren't as pure or simple as they present, and like Jesus, if we aren't careful, we may find ourselves in an either/or situation with no good outcome.

A colleague of mine shared how a church member arrived at his office one morning with bagels, coffee and a smile in hand. At first, he thought it a lovely and generous gesture of hospitality. Sadly, it was short-lived. Before my colleague could even take a bite of his bagel, the member set upon him

with what amounted to arguments with question marks tacked onto the end. The member had come as a wolf dressed in sheep's clothing, appearing docile but primed for attack.

Like the pharisees and herodians, the member's intention wasn't to have friendly conversation or even an open discussion — rather they had mastered the skill of posing questions that aren't really questions at all — but are a litmus test.

Such encounters are inherently manipulative. And we can easily fall prey to this trap of inauthenticity of communication. I know I have. There have definitely been times in my marriage or work life when I've entered into conversation, not with openness and curiosity, or an intention to dialogue and learn, but with the intent of justifying my viewpoint. Certain that I already knew the answer to my "question", I came to make a point, and as you might imagine, things didn't go very well. Because when we come to the table attached to our point of view, we fail to consider that of others.

And this is what we see in our gospel today. The Pharisees and Herodians lead with "nice" and then go in for the kill, presenting to Jesus what at first sight appears a simple question posed to Jesus, the teacher:

"Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor?"

Yet, with this question, they attempt to set a trap of dualism: Is it A, or is it B? Yes or no? They try to disappear the gray knowing that if Jesus says yes, they and his followers will be able to condemn him for siding with the empire. And, if he answers no, he could be arrested for sedition against that same empire.

We see throughout Matthew's gospel that when Jesus is given the choice of A or B, he always comes up with a creative C. Jesus here has a clear sense of who he is, of what he has been called to do, and under pressure that would crumble most of us, he stands strong, speaking not aggressively or defensively, but with clarity — a clarity that leaves them silent and in awe.

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

And this begs this question: "Doesn't everything belong to God?"

Psalm 24 says, "The earth is the LORD's and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it" (Psalm 24:1). And today's Psalmist reminds us to "proclaim the greatness of the Lord our God, and worship him upon his holy hill, for the Lord our God is the Holy One." As Christians we profess that we believe that God brought forth creation, and that we humans are created in God's image. We acknowledge our gifts of reason, intelligence and wisdom, given us not so that we might live independent of God, but so that as God's people on earth, we might use them in service of God and one another. Certainly we in our turn have created the political structures and currencies which allow our society to function, structures and currencies that can be employed for good, or ill. We understand that to function well and for the good of all people, we need structure — and we are called to contribute to that structure, just as we receive its benefit.

Even as Jesus acknowledges this, he speaks a more profound truth: that God is always to be put first. In every decision we make: how we use our financial and earthly resources, how we support the life of our church and community, or how we engage someone in meaningful dialogue, God is to be at the center, informing who we are, how we behave, what we believe and how we express that in the world.

When God is centric to our lives, the giving of our wealth, resources, time and wisdom will reflect who God is for us, and will aid us in giving to God what is God's — and doing what God asks of us: loving God with all our hearts, minds, body and soul; and generously and intentionally loving our neighbors as ourselves. We are God's. And God desires to be in relationship with us. God demands our all, and Jesus reminds us that in giving of ourselves fully, we are rendering to God what is God's.

So, what are the questions we are invited to ponder, and how might we identify the ways in which we may honor God, with generosity, with authenticity, with open hearts?

One question that arose for me is, "What if we were to act as if everyone and everything is God's?" Everything we have; all of the resources we use, the people we love or abhor. Everything. If we could hold this premise as truth, how might it shift things for us?

Perhaps we would become people better able to trust in God's care and provision for our lives? Maybe we would discover that not only do we have enough, but we are enough. Could we find ourselves less afraid or anxious, and more willing to share generously all that we have?

Jesus teaches this existential fact: This all belongs to God, and calls us as his follower to ground ourselves in it, so that we can participate more completely in God's reign, where each person has enough, and knows they are loved by God. Isn't the vision of world peace that we all long for?

So, when we find ourselves facing taxing questions, how might we respond? Maybe we think we know the choices: Plan A, or Plan B. Maybe the pathway seems obvious, but truly sometimes we know in our hearts that neither plan A or B is the right way to go. The question is, Can we be open to Plan C? What if we were willing to step away from living in the poles of absolutes so that we could find and live with God in the center —the holy place and space where we may entrust our lives, and all that we have into God's hands, care and leading? For it is in the giving that we receive; it is in practicing surrender that we come to rely upon God for all that we are and have, and to open ourselves to receive God's grace in our lives, and thus, be bearers of that grace into the world.

“Life is short. We don't have much time to gladden the hearts of those who walk this way with us. So, be swift to love and make haste to be kind.” –

Henri-Frédéric Amiel

What is God calling you to render unto to God today?

**Jan Richardson, Reflection on Matthew 22