

Pardon the Tacky Intro...

[Text - Matthew 22:15-22]

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A man driving down the highway suddenly swerves to avoid a box that had fallen off the truck in front of him, broke open and covered the road with hundreds of little nails. Moments later, a police officer pulls the man over and cites him for reckless driving. As the officer starts writing the ticket, the man points to the nails on the road. "You see, officer, I had to swerve or I would have run over all those tiny little nails and blown a tire!" "I completely understand", the officer replies, tearing up the ticket, "But now I'm afraid I'm going to have to arrest you." "Arrest me? For what?" "For *tacks* evasion."

If you think that joke was bad, imagine how bad it would be to be forced to pay taxes to support a foreign army occupying your homeland. In Jesus' day, the people of Israel are doing just that. That's why the tax collectors are so vehemently despised. That's also why the religious authorities think that they finally have Jesus trapped, with their question about paying taxes. If he says "yes" to paying taxes to the emperor, the people will resent and reject him; but if he says "No, don't pay the tax," then the Roman officials can take him away as a subversive enemy of the state. Either way, the Pharisees figure that they're poised to ruin Jesus' ability to inspire and lead the people; however, once again, they're wrong.

In spite of their attempt to force him to give a direct "yes" or "no answer", Jesus doesn't play into their hand. He knows that their question is simply a trap, and not a sincere quest for the truth. So he's not going to give those scheming questioners anything to use against him. Nonetheless, even though Jesus side-steps their trap, he still addresses the genuine issue that's been raised - which is the issue of where one's loyalty and commitment ultimately lie. And this is a timeless issue, which challenges people of every nation and in every generation - including you and me today.

Jesus provides no easy answers to those who struggle to be faithful to God, *and* loyal to their nation; but he does *coin* a phrase [so to speak] which provides a guiding principle to apply to this endeavor. "Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's!"

In other words, Jesus seems to be encouraging people to figure out the implications of this issue for their own time and situation.

In an occupied land, like First Century Israel, where people have no political freedom, civil *obedience* is sometimes required in order to simply survive. However, for citizens of a free land, well-informed and conscientious civil *disobedience* may be needed - in order to be faithful to God *and* genuinely loyal to one's country. In Jesus' case, his focus is on advancing the boundless and borderless Realm of Divine love and grace; therefore the issues of Roman rule is really beside the point. Whether Caesar is in charge, or if the Hebrew King Herod suddenly took over, Jesus' way of proclaiming and showing Divine love and grace would probably look the same. And maybe this can give you and me some insight for determining where our own loyalties lie, and how those loyalties can actually be implemented in our own lives.

In this morning's Call to Worship, the Psalmist declares, "The earth is God's, and *all* that is within it; the world, and all that dwells therein." And Jesus himself is totally committed to this notion of a Divine "Eminent Domain" over all things, all people, and all of Life. Therefore Jesus doesn't allow the religious or political powers of his day to keep him from fully enjoying Life, or from enhancing the lives of those around him. And he certainly doesn't allow narrow-minded social, religious, or political prejudices to keep him from reaching out to all kinds of people, regardless of their past history or current status.

For Jesus, judging people as being either good or bad, and categorizing things as being either sacred or secular, are pointless endeavors. To him, there is no one or no thing in all of Creation that doesn't ultimately belong to the Divine Source from which they originate. And in Jesus' practical application of that belief, there is no person on earth who cannot receive or reflect the gracious love of that Divine Source. In fact, Jesus makes a special effort to evoke that Divine Compassion and Grace from those people who many see as miserable, despicable *sinner*s: foreigners and fornicators, lepers and losers, shady prostitutes and social pariahs. Jesus even recognizes the Divine worth in those Empire-employed *tax-collectors* - inviting one of them, Matthew, to be part of his closest circle of followers and friends.

Jesus has this remarkable ability to keep his focus on the Divine Presence and Preeminence in Life, regardless of where he is or who he's with; which is why he can bring-forth a Divine response from all kinds of people. Now obviously, there are some people who don't embrace or reflect Divine Goodness and Grace; just as there are some times in your life and mine when we fail to embrace or reflect Divine Light and Love. But this doesn't mean that our Divine Source is absent; it means that we are choosing to act in ways that disregard or dismiss that Divine Presence. I'll admit that for me, sometimes going the "way of the world" seems a bit more solid and sensible and secure, than trusting in the Divine Way of Compassion, Grace, and Vulnerability. So I opt for more of a *social* security, rather than a *sacred* one. I trust in the physical reality I can touch, rather than the Spiritual Reality that can touch me.

Fortunately, the Good News that Jesus Christ reveals, is that the Divine Presence is *incarnate*, and *inescapable* - that the Sacred Imprint is everywhere, and the Divine DNA is in everything! This is why Jesus can say that it's appropriate to "Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's." Because in the final analysis, *all* things come from God, belong to God, and return to God! When you and I remember this and trust it, we will be far more willing to render all that we have and all that we are, toward advancing that which is good and loving and positive. And this affects every aspect of our lives, including our citizenship. For when you and I realize that we owe it to ourselves, our God and our country, to give - and to expect - the very best, we will do what we can to work for a good and just government. Because when you and I pay our taxes [assuming that we *do*] we then have a vested interest in advocating that the money be used in ways that are in line with a Holy and Wholesome purpose.

This is why it's possible and *patriotic* for American citizens to support our military troops, yet strongly protest against the way in which those troops are used. We can respect and honor the men and women who courageously serve in our armed forces, yet still speak-out against governmental policies and practices that are detrimental to our nation and to our world. For example, the fact that the U.S. spends more on military programs than the other top 19 nations in the world *combined*, just might set off an alarm in the minds of us Citizens who seek to follow the Prince of Peace! Therefore, it's appropriate as good Christians and good Americans to advocate that at least a moderate fraction of those 700 *billion* annual military dollars be diverted toward hunger relief, housing, health care, or [if

we've gotta fight] combating cancer or Ebola! Regardless of where our political loyalties lie, we must remember that our ultimate allegiance belongs to the Compassionate Source of all Life, who calls you and me to honor and respect all humankind, "the earth, and all that dwells therein!"

When we do remember this, it gives us the inspiration and the courage to work for an honest, fair, and peaceful society. It keeps us from the illusion that there is *anything* in our lives, or any part of our lives, which cannot be rendered to our Divine Source. And it empowers us to follow the Way of Jesus Christ - the One who renders himself completely to God and to others; the One who - today - graciously calls for you and me to do the same.

If we work together at this, I believe we'll find that it really doesn't have to be that *taxing!*