

St. Thomas's Episcopal Church
Newark, DE
Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost – October 22, 2017/Year A
Isaiah 45:1-7; Psalm 96:1-9; 1 Thessalonians 1:1-10; Matthew 22:15-22
The Reverend Paul W. Gennett, Jr.

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May my words reveal the greater glory of God. AMEN

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Show me the money!! I am guessing most everyone born before 2000 is familiar with this famous line. Of course, it is from that classic event of our time – **the annual stewardship campaign!** Not really, although some campaigns have taken on this strident slogan much too often for my experience of ministry.

Show me the money is actually the classic and most often quoted line from the movie **Jerry McGuire** featuring Tom Cruise, Cuba Gooding Jr., Rene Zellwegger, and other notable stars of the day. The premise of this movie was about a hot-shot sports agent who falls from favor in a larger agency and loses his job. He presses on independently, striving to represent Gooding Jr. who is about to enter the free agent market. He meets Zellwegger and her young son, falls in love and finds his anchor of humanity and morality again. The “gods” they chase and worship are, of course, **football**. Well, some things just do not change all that much it seems.

Show me the money!! In Matthew's Gospel, the **controversy conversations** between Jesus and the Pharisees continue around the issue of living in the world and being faithful to God's Word and work in the world as well. As I prayed these words, I was reminded of another movie **Pay It Forward**. A lovely movie about a young boy who took on a teacher's challenge by helping one person, and then requesting that the person **pay it forward** by helping at least three other people.

It seems to me that for God and Christ Jesus, our faithful living calls us to live out the mind and heart of **show me the faith ... show all the Love!**

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“Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor or not?” It would have been nice if Jesus had answered, **“Nope it is not, keep your money.”** I read this passage every quarter before paying into Social Security, or on April 15 before paying taxes, just to make sure I have read it correctly.

The crux of the issue in this controversy conversation is this. If Jesus commended NOT to pay taxes, he would have been arrested for sedition against the Roman Empire. If he commended TO pay taxes, he would have been honoring another “god” as Caesar was believed to be in Roman culture. The Pharisees know the trap of this question, and this time they believed they had Jesus exactly where they wanted him. They even went as far as to conspire with the Herodians, their political rivals, which might be analogous to the Republicans actually agreeing to do something with the Democrats without rancor, debate, incivility, or political intrigue. What a concept! The trap was set, airtight and without loopholes. No escape for Jesus this time ... or perhaps not.

Jesus questions their question, asking to see one of the coins used to pay taxes. The coin, a denarius, had a picture of the emperor on one side with the inscription, **“Tiberius Caesar, august son of the divine Augustus, high priest.”** Right from the beginning, the coin violates TWO of God’s commandments – **not to have any other gods before me, and not to worship any graven images.** In essence, this coin was blasphemous to the faithful Jew.

But when Jesus asks to see a coin, it looks like it comes right from the pocket of a Pharisee, a holy leader of the people of Israel! Without saying it directly, Jesus says, **“Who has one of these idolatrous coins?”** and the Pharisee answers, **“You betcha, got one right here in my pocket!”** The wisdom of Jesus is then unfolded in his answer, **“Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s.”** The perfect answer to the “gotcha” question, proclaiming God’s presence in ALL of life beyond any mortal and material things

Jesus teaching always invites us to go deeper, to look and hear **underneath** the answer he gives, or the parable he tells. The first part of the answer, **“Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s ...”** A portion of what we earn for our work of life does belong to our governments, local, state, and federal. It is the foundation established by our ancestors, the call for ALL people to share in our freedom, and those with more to give to those who have less for the benefit of ALL. I believe we all like roads that are paved and smooth, bridges that are secure, security provided by police and fire departments, and so on. In order to have these services in our life, Jesus simply says, **“Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s ...”**

It is the second part of Jesus’ answer that is the rub to this day. **“And to God the things that are God’s.”** What EXACTLY belongs of our life and living to God? **EVERYTHING** belongs to God! There is nothing we can name that is beyond the realm of God’s presence and prevue. Another way to hear this teaching comes from Genesis 1:27 – *“So God created humankind* in his image, in the image of God he created them ...”* What belongs to Caesar **bears his image**, and that is exactly the same for what belongs to God! We are God’s coins, God’s most valued and valuable possession. Jesus calls us to live and bear **the image of God in all that we are, through all that we do, all of the time.**

According to the prophet Isaiah, Cyrus knew nothing of Israel’s God, yet he was anointed to do God’s work. God opens the doors before Cyrus and levels the mountains. The Lord God of Israel called Cyrus by name and made possible his victories. *“I am the Lord, and there is no other; besides me there is no god. I arm you, though you do not know me”.* Cyrus was chosen as the agent of the Lord for the sake of God’s chosen people. Through the foreign king’s triumph, all nations from east to west were being shown that no other power existed. Nothing could take place apart from the Lord.

God's actions in the world are not limited to sacred events, but include all aspects of human existence. With the return of the exiles to their homeland, the peoples of the world would recognize the Lord's faithfulness to Israel and join in worshipping the one true God. When read alongside the Gospel, these passages reveal once again that **everything belongs to God, even** a foreign emperor.

God does not need our money, our resources, and our income tax statements for the past seven years! GOD WANTS YOU AND ME, and ultimately, we need to be **paying and praying forward** for God! We **pray and pay forward** to combat the insidious grip of materialism on our lives. We **pray and pay forward** to enable YOUR church to fulfill the work of ministry, to deepen your spiritual life and living, and to **be kingdom builders for God and Jesus Christ, right here and right now.**

We **pray and pay forward** in order to **be most authentically alive** through the grace and gifts of God to us, in us, and through us. As Winston Churchill said, "**We make a living by what we get from our work ... we make a life by what you give.**" The commandments, words of prophet power, and challenging invitations of Jesus are not requirements that, by doing so, God will love you more than anyone else. These mandates invite us **to grow up in God** for the expansion and transformation of our spiritual lives and living. These mandates put up the mirror to our natural egocentricity and allow us to encounter with reverence **the best of who we are, who God has created us to be in this life, the love and lovely and loving spirit, now.**

It seems to me that for God and Christ Jesus, our faithful living calls us to be of the mind and heart of **show me the faith ... show all the Love!**

AMEN