

WHAT BELONGS TO GOD

Matthew 22:15-22 *But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, "Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites?"*

The Pharisees were very conscientious about doing the right religious things. They sent some disciples to Jesus with a question. They joined up with the Herodians, the ruling class that collaborated with Rome. This group represents those who had accommodated religiously and politically to the Roman occupation. They had prepared a question designed to get Jesus to show his true colors. His response, they hoped, would expose him as being on one side or another, as being with them in their accommodation to Rome or with the Zealots and other radicals resented and resisted Roman rule.

First, they try to butter Jesus up: Teacher, we know you are sincere, and teach only God's way, and you don't compromise yourself to anyone regardless of who they are. Now, with most of us, this would work. We want others' approval, and when someone flatters us, we melt. But it doesn't work with Jesus. What do you think, they ask. Is it lawful according to our laws to pay taxes to the emperor or not? If Jesus says it is unlawful, he puts himself on the side of the revolutionists, the Zealots, and lands in hot water with Rome. If he says it is lawful, then he alienates those who want him to be a radical revolutionary, and puts himself closer to the Pharisees as a compromiser.

I want to say just a brief word about Jesus' answer and then go back to something that struck me as very important about this story, something I'd not really seen or thought about before. Jesus asks for a coin. Notice that he doesn't have one, which gives us something to think about. It is a Roman coin, a denarius. Whose image and inscription is on it? The emperor's, they answer. Good enough. And here we can imagine him handing the coin back. Then give the emperor what is the emperor's and God what belongs to God. The questioners don't know what to make of this. They slink away to regroup, to figure out what went wrong and plot the next move in their game.

Jesus' answer is not as clear as we might think. He doesn't tell us exactly what to do with regard to the relationship between faith and politics, church and state, and so forth. Jesus' teaching is very Eastern in this sense. He gives us something that makes us think more deeply, that puzzles us and forces us to come to grips with it at a deep personal level. Jesus doesn't like hypothetical or theoretical discussions. He has no patience with intellectualizing and philosophizing. He is calling people to change in the dawn of God's kingdom, God's transformation of life. He calls us to change so that we live that new order of things right now.

Give to the emperor what is the emperor's and to God what is God's. Is paying the tax an abandoning of faith in God? Is it all as clear-cut as the Pharisees want to make it, black and white, right and wrong? And what DOES belong to the emperor and to God? "The earth is the Lord's and everything that is in it," says Psalm 24. Jesus' faith and religious tradition held that everything in the world, including our own lives, belongs to God. We might add, and not to the emperor. So Jesus leaves it with his questioners to answer in their own hearts. And he leaves it to us to work it out for ourselves.

This leads me back to what I saw in this story as though for the first time. Not the question and Jesus' answer, but the questioners themselves. They come to Jesus not seeking to be more faithful. They come to entangle Jesus in all the stuff they themselves are tangled up in—politics, nationalism, religion, their culture. They come to Jesus with lives and souls that are caught in alliances and loyalties and power structures. They don't know their own hearts. They are out of touch with the need of their own spirits to be alive in God, to seek God, and respond to God with their very lives. In other words, they had lost touch with faith as a trusting and responsive relationship with the living God.

Jesus sees this right away. He knows they aren't really interested in truth or struggling honestly with how they can be faithful. He knows that they are not living their lives at the deepest level, that is, their relationship with God and what that means for them personally. I think Jesus' perceiving of their hypocrisy, their duplicity, is part of his compassion. He sees how off track they have gotten from what is most important. They are caught up in the spiritually deadening complexities of what other people think, what is popular, what is expedient, what seems successful. Jesus wants to offer them a way back, point them back toward true security and success—their relationship with God.

I was reminded of a story from Buddhism told by Thich Nhat Hanh. A young man named Subhadda came to see the Buddha, who was then eighty years old and near death. Ananda, the Buddha's assistant, thought the visit would be too exhausting for his master, so he tried to turn Subhadda away. But the Buddha overheard the conversation and asked Ananda to let the young man in. Even on his deathbed, the Buddha showed compassion.

Subhadda had a question for the Buddha: "World-Honored One, are the other religious teachers fully enlightened?" In other words, are other folks right in their practice and faith? The Buddha knew that his time was short and that answering such a question would be a waste of precious moments. "Subhadda, it is not important whether they are fully enlightened. The question is whether you want to liberate yourself." Thich Nhat Hanh comments that when we have the opportunity to ask a teacher a question about truth, we need to ask something that will change our lives. [Thich Nhat Hanh, [The Heart of the Buddha's Teaching](#), p. 49].

There is a similar story in the gospels [Lk. 9:49]. The disciples come to Jesus worried that there are some people casting out demons in Jesus' name,

but they are not part of the inner circle of Jesus' disciples, they are "not following us." Jesus' response is, "Don't worry about that. Whoever is not against you is for you. What does it matter if they are part of our group? They are doing what they are doing for the purpose of good. Or maybe not. The point is, What are you doing to be faithful? What are you doing in my name? What are you doing with your life?"

When we ask Jesus a question, we need to ask something that will change us, that will bring us to fuller life, fuller love. When we seek spiritual truth, we need to be sure we are asking for ourselves, that we are sincerely desiring to live more authentically. We spend so much time and energy discussing stuff that has to do with other people, with things that do not have to do with our own lives and how we are to live them. Are the other churches being faithful? Are other religions true? Who is right and who is wrong? We become preoccupied with what is going on around us and outside of us. Jesus wants us to give our attention to what is going on inside us, what is going on with OUR lives, our relationships with God. In the Festival Center Mission Group, one of the questions we each are to respond to in our spiritual reports is, "What do I believe God is doing with my life?" Tough question. It gets us down to what is most important, forces us to reflect on our own lives and their relationship with God. What does it mean FOR US that "the earth belongs to God and everything in it," including ourselves? How can we come alive to God in all the dimensions of our own lives? Those are the important questions, for they have to do with our own lives, our own hearts, and our own relationships with the living God and God's compassion and love.

Today is the National Observance of Children's Sabbaths. Kaye began our worship this morning with the story of Jesus and the children from the Children Worship & Wonder program. This program is based upon the work of Sophia Cavalleti, whose work with children's spirituality was influenced by Maria Montessori. This program assumes that children already have a relationship with God when they come into this world. We don't have to put that in them, as it were, and when we try to do that, we only mess them up. Jesus said that the kingdom of God already belongs to children, that we need to become like children if we want to enter that kingdom. Anthony De Mello was a Jesuit priest born in Bombay, India. He drew from his own Eastern spirituality to teach thousands of people what God's reality means for their happiness. "Happiness," he wrote, "is our natural state. Happiness is the natural state of little children, to whom the kingdom belongs." I included only half of his sentence at the top of the bulletin this morning. The whole sentence is: "Happiness is the natural state of little children to whom the kingdom belongs, until they have been polluted and contaminated by the stupidity of society and culture." Our responsibility is to provide children a context and atmosphere in which they can stay in touch with and deepen their relationship with God. Young children don't get caught up in duplicity, what Jesus called hypocrisy. They are closer to God than we are, just as when we were young children, we were closer to God than we later became. Jesus knew that children could show us what it means to live in God's kingdom. They can lead

us into that kingdom if we can become like them in trust, in simplicity of heart, and in sincere seeking.

Children's questions are different from the kind of question Jesus was asked that day. They come from a place of honesty and the desire to learn. They don't ask questions to prove that someone is right or wrong, but to probe life deeply. Through my years of meeting with children as they prepared for baptism, I learned the honesty of children. Their questions were not idle ones. They were direct and to the heart of things. This was often difficult for me, made me uncomfortable. All my seminary classes didn't help much. I was forced to answer from my heart as honestly as I could, including saying that I simply didn't know the answer. This kind of questioning opens up the possibility of becoming co-seekers with children in a community of spiritual learning. I learned at last to relax with children, sharing what I knew and what I didn't know, and listening more carefully to their wisdom. My own relationship with God always became more immediate and enlivened through these times with children.

Give to the emperor what belongs to the emperor and to God what belongs to God. Jesus sends the questioners away with the best and most helpful answer he could offer. It brought them face to face with their own lives and their own faith, IF they would receive that answer. Jesus leaves us, too, to take this answer and work with it in our own lives, to struggle with it in our own ways and out of our relationships with God and our present understandings of those relationships. Jesus cuts through all the loyalties and attachments we have, all our entanglements. He invites us to be in touch with our own hearts and to seek from our own hearts, from our desire to know, love, and be faithful to the God to whom all life belongs. If we ask from that depth of our hearts, and if we seek from that central place within us, then we will be on the path of truth and life. The answers we find in our own hearts may lead us to compromise or get us in hot water, may give rise to protest or to patience. At any moment, God may lead us into peaceful pastures or troubled waters. But through it all, if we are paying attention to our own hearts and lives, we discover more and more the true security and freedom of living as those who trust God in all things, for it all belongs to God.