

October 19, 2014 / Season after Pentecost / David L. Edwards

National Observance of Children's Sabbaths

WHAT BELONGS TO GOD

1 Thessalonians 1:1-3, 8-10

For the people of those regions report about us what kind of welcome we had among you, and how you turned to God from idols, to serve a living and true God...

Matthew 22:15-22

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

The Pharisees were preoccupied with doing the right religious things. Jesus made them nervous because he was more interested the kind of life religion points us to than preserving, promoting, or perpetuating religion for its own sake. The Pharisees sent some disciples to "entrap" Jesus, says the text. A few Herodians, the upper, ruling class, joined in. Altogether, this group represents religion turned in on itself and accommodating to the culture, in this case the Roman occupation. They conspired to expose Jesus as violating religious law, or being with them in their accommodation to Rome, or putting himself in opposition to 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.* Flattery does not work with Jesus. He is concerned with what is true, not what feels good to his ego. Their question: Is it lawful according to our religious 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 is in hot water with Rome. If he says it is lawful, then he alienates those who want him to be a revolutionary, and puts himself in the compromiser camp. He can't win...or can he?

Jesus asks for a coin. Notice that Jesus does not have a coin, which gives us something right there to think about. He doesn't have cash or a credit card, and if he ever has any money, we can presume he does not hold onto it. Someone hands him a Roman coin, a denarius. Jesus asks: *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 are amazed, astonished, dumbfounded—all of which could be translations of the word used here (*thaumadzo*). They slink away to regroup and figure out what went wrong.

Jesus' answer is spiritually brilliant, and it should astonish us, as well. He does not tell us what to do with regard to 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 see things in a completely different way. Jesus doesn't like theoretical discussions. He does not engage in intellectualizing or lofty spiritual ponderings. He calls people to change in the dawn of God's kingdom, life as God created it to be lived. He calls us to change so that we live that new and true order of things right now._

Give the emperor what is the emperor's and God what is God's. The coin belongs to the emperor; his imprint is on it. Give it to him. But, what DOES belong to God? Well, Psalm 24 gives the basic scriptural understanding: "The earth is the Lord's and everything that is in it." Jesus' spiritual tradition, and ours, holds that everything in the world, including our own lives, comes from God and belongs to God. We might add, and not to the emperor. So Jesus leaves it to his questioners and to us to work it out in our own hearts and lives.

A few years ago, while working on this text, I saw something in this story as though for the first time--the questioners themselves. They come to Jesus not seeking to be more faithful. They come to entangle him in all the stuff they themselves are tangled up in—politics, nationalism, and religion. They come to Jesus with lives and souls caught in alliances and loyalties and power structures. They don't know their own hearts. They have drifted far away from the essence of their own religion, and forgotten that, though the emperor's imprint is on the coin, God's imprint is on their lives. They belong to God alone. They are created in God's image (Gen. 1:26-27).

Jesus knows they aren't really interested in truth or seeking how they can be more faithful. They want to change him, not themselves. Jesus' perceptiveness is part of his compassion. He sees how far these folks have drifted from what is most important. Their spirits have been deadened by concern for what other people think, what is popular, expedient, successful, powerful, and so forth. They are caught in defending religion rather than living out of the heart of religion. They are serving so many gods that they don't know who, or whose, they are. Jesus wants to offer them a way back to their belonging to God, not to Rome or anything else.

I was reminded of a story 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 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 people right in their beliefs or practice? The Buddha knew that his time was short and that answering such a question would be a waste of precious time and energy. “Subhadda, it is not important whether they are fully enlightened or not. 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 one 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 some people were casting out demons in Jesus’ name, but they were not part of the inner circle of Jesus’ disciples. They were “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 with your own life? What are you doing to be more faithful?

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 too much precious time and energy concerned with other people, what they are doing or not doing, and with things that distract us from what we are given and gifted to do. 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 own lives, our own relationships with God.

Here is a good “working question” for us in our inward journey: What do I believe God is doing with my life? Each mission group might work with that question as part of accountability reports. What do I sense God doing with my life? What does it mean to me that “the earth belongs to God and everything in it,” including my own life? How can I get free from my entanglements with all the gods in our culture that I have been sold and bought into? I like very much Paul’s words to the community at Thessalonica. He tells them that everyone is talking about the liveliness of their faith, how they “turned to God from idols, to serve a living and true God.” This is the same thing as waking up to the wonderful, powerful, and radical reality that God’s imprint is on each and every one of us. We are, indeed, created in God’s image. Let us never underestimate the effect of our own turning away from all those gods to serve, as Paul said, a living and true God—the source, power, and life-giving energy of the whole creation.

Today is the National Observance of Children's Sabbaths. Kaye began our worship with the story of Jesus and the children from the Children Worship & Wonder program. This way of worship for children is based upon the work of Sophia Cavalleti, whose understanding of children's spirituality was influenced by Maria Montessori. Children already have a relationship with God when they come into this world. We don't have to put that in them, much less, God forbid, "save" them. When we try to do that, we only mess them up. Jesus taught that the kingdom of God already belongs to children, and 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 spiritual tradition 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, until they have been polluted and contaminated by the stupidity of society and culture." Our responsibility is to provide children a context and a community in which they can stay in touch with and deepen their relationship with God and their awareness of belonging to 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. We can become like them in trust, in simplicity of heart, and in sincere seeking. Young children know, not in their heads but in their very being, that God's imprint is on them, and they naturally give to God what is God's. They can help us recover our awareness of God's imprint, God's image in which we are created, and live in ways that we give to God with our whole being.

This has become once again vivid for me as I spend time with our granddaughter Arabella. We were with her last weekend, caring for her while her parents were away for two days. My joy is sharing with Arabella her delight in everything and the whole-hearted way she lives. She is as yet unencumbered in mind and heart. Or as De Mello put it, she has not yet been polluted and contaminated by the stupidity of society and culture. My prayer for her is that she will stay in touch with God's imprint, God's image, throughout her life. I pray that she will always know that she belongs first and foremost to the very spirit and power that created her and the whole universe. I pray this for all children. And I pray that we, Jesus' community, will always welcome children and live and work for a society, a world that welcomes and values children in this way.

Jesus' question is a very fruitful one for our inward journey work. It can help us look within ourselves, to become aware of where we are attached to Caesar or to other gods, and

have drifted away from the freedom and joy of knowing we first belong to God and everything belongs to God. Our attachments to or seeking of the approval of others, the hurts or anger we have not let go of, the desire that others conform to our own view of things or the way we think they should be or act. The attachments to the cultural values around us - nationalism, militarism, accumulation of wealth, and the pervasive, false view that our happiness depends on something or someone outside of us, instead of claiming the happiness which, in Anthony De Mello's words, is our natural, created state. These are things we can look at as we give time to our inward journey, to seeing, understanding, and then letting go of the things that have clouded our awareness that we have upon our very being the imprint of God to whom everything belongs. We are the image, the reflection, the expression of God.