

Jesus said, “Give to God the things that are God’s.”
We belong to God. We are called to give ourselves to God.

Jesus asked, “Whose image is on this money?”
They answered, “It’s the emperor.”
Jesus told them to give that money to the emperor.

The implied second question is this, “Whose image do you see everywhere else?”
We answer, “We see God’s image in all of creation.”
Jesus tells us to give to God the things that are God’s.
We belong to God. We are called to give ourselves to God.

I’ll admit. Today’s Gospel lesson has never been one of my favorites. And I get to preach today when it pops up in our lectionary cycle. Oooh...goody.

While Jesus turning the tables on the religious leaders is always entertaining, this encounter seems so cut and dried. It is often interpreted as Jesus laying the groundwork for the separation of church and state. Church gets this. Government gets that. What more is there to say about it?

On Thursday I went to the weekly meeting of the campus ministry Open Table at Luther House and joined a fascinating discussion with university students. I gained an entirely new perspective on today’s Gospel lesson.

In this passage, the religious leaders try to get Jesus into trouble. The Pharisees and the Herodians – who don’t even like each other, by the way – ask Jesus if it is lawful to pay taxes to the emperor. They believe it’s a Catch-22.

If Jesus says “yes”, his followers will see him as supporting the oppressive Roman empire and abandon him.

If Jesus says “no”, he will be seen as an insurrectionist by the Roman empire and likely be executed.

But Jesus is able to thread the needle of this question because the government is so incredibly vain and self-serving. The coins used by the empire were propaganda. They always showed a profile of the current emperor to remind you who was in charge.

So Jesus said this money bears the image of the governmental leader. It clearly belongs to the emperor and the government so give it to them.

BUT – you also have to give God what belongs to God.

Genesis. Chapter 1. Verse 26 and 27. “Then God said, “Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness. So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them.”

We are the image of God. We are called to give ourselves to God.

Our money is covered with images of our country. We pay our taxes. We give the government the things that we owe them.

But we are called to give ourselves to God.

This goes so much further than the supposed separation of church and state. In our current culture, Christian Nationalism is the exact opposite of what Jesus is teaching us today. Christian Nationalism is an attempt to wrap a certain view of God into the way our country is governed.

And not the loving, accepting, merciful, and forgiving God we believe in and worship....but a vengeful, narrow minded interpretation of God that certain politicians – Pharisees, Herodians, hypocrites – want to promote to keep us in line.

Jesus tells us “NO!” While we do owe some things to our country, we can support our country without worshipping it. Give what is owed to the government to them....but everything else – GIVE TO GOD.

We are created in the image of God. We see the image of God everywhere we look and in the eyes of every single person we encounter. There is no “us” and “them.” We all bear the image of God.

And we are therefore called to give ourselves to God.

But Deacon David, you may ask.....what does that mean? How do we do that? Good questions.

I mentioned earlier that I went to the weekly gathering at the student ministry Open Table at Luther House this week. The pastor there, Rhonda Newby-Torres, is using the book, “Liturgies for Resisting Empire” by Kat Armas to lead discussions this semester. The subtitle of the book is “Seeking Community, Belonging, and Peace in a Dehumanizing World.” Each week we talk about a way to resist what our culture tells us we need to do. It’s counter cultural. It’s Jesus.

This week we talked about resisting the hustle – and embracing rest. Our capitalist society tells us we are only useful...only valuable...if we are constantly busy. We must hustle to earn the perfect grade....hustle to get the perfect job....to earn the highest salary....to buy the best and newest whatever.

Of course, there is nothing wrong with being productive and useful, but you cannot give to God the beautiful things God deserves if you are constantly hustling – if you are always listening to the world and not to God. Resisting the hustle is basically embracing the concept of Sabbath – taking time to rest and refresh yourself. To be open to what God is saying to you.

In Psalm 46 we hear the gentle encouragement, “Be still and know that I am God.”

Resist the hustle. Resist. Resist anything that draws you away from God.

Of course, the irony of telling college students to resist the hustle was not lost on Pastor Rhonda and me. But we encouraged all the students to find ways to take time for themselves – where they can slow down, be still, and listen to God’s call.

It turned out to be the 90 minutes one student takes every other week to have their nails done. It was the half hour between two classes when one person sits by the duck pond and closes their eyes. It’s the weekly pizza date one student has with their best friend at the Student Union.

Resist the hustle. Resist the way our culture tells us to constantly be moving so we are productive and useful citizens of our society. Resist listening to the babble from our government and the 24-hour news cycle. Resist giving so much to the empire.

And by empire, I mean anything that takes you away from God.

We belong to God. We are called to give ourselves to God.

And that brings us back to today's Gospel reading.

Jesus threaded the needle between what the religious leaders and Roman empire wanted and the Good News of God's love he was teaching.

I think the message we need to take with us today is that we are called to thread the needle between our spiritual lives – our call to follow the teaching of Jesus – and living in the world that calls us to hustle – to keep moving – to be productive...or else.

That's how we give ourselves to God.

By resisting the call of the bigger and better.

By resisting the cult of those who only want glory for themselves.

By resisting the pack when we know they don't share our values.

By resisting thinking only of ourselves and not the long-term needs of others.

We give ourselves to God by following the teachings of Jesus.

By welcoming the stranger.

By feeding the hungry, visiting the sick, and clothing the naked.

By praying for the needs of others.

By resisting the hustle and making time to listen to God's call.

Yes. There are things the world – our government – our society demands of us.
Do what is required.

But resist the hustle. Embrace Rest.

Jesus said, "Give to God the things that are God's."

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Gratitude to the website "Working Preacher" for the direction of this sermon.