Sermon October 22, 2017

Matthew 22:15-22

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“Therefore give to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s and to God the things that are God’s.”

OK, are you awake enough for a little thought exercise today? Good.

Think about how you spent your day yesterday. From the time you got out of bed to the time you went to bed.

Now mentally highlight three or four activities you did yesterday that took up most of your time.

Focusing on those three or four activities, think of whom you served doing those activities:

If one activity was work, your job, then you served yourself (salary) and the company/establishment you work for.

Maybe one activity was working out in the gym, then you served yourself and by extension your family and friends (keeping ourselves healthy is not being selfish because our health affects the lives of those around us).

Maybe you read a good book, or spent time with friends – you served yourself and friends.

If one activity was grocery shopping - you served yourself, family, and maybe friends.

You see where I’m going with this.

Now of all these activities, whom did you serve most often served? Yourself, right?

But notice, that with most things in life that we do, there is often someone else that benefits from our being active in the world.

All well and good.

I thought about this topic this week when reading our Gospel message.

The underlying premise is about Jesus exposing the Pharisee’s hypocrisy. For the Pharisees, carrying and worshiping idols was against the Law of Moses. So when Jesus asks to look at a coin, and one of the Pharisees hands him a coin of the realm bearing the Roman emperor’s image, they demonstrate their hypocrisy. Yet there is a deeper message in today’s reading.

And that revolves around the question:

Whom are we called to serve in our daily lives? The secular world or God?

Ideally, we strive to serve our family, our community, and our nation. In an ideal world we’re offered opportunities to serve all three and we respond to these invitations to serve with joy.

But that is in an ideal world. It’s a good goal to strive for, but in my experience it’s not often attained.

When I’m trying to be my best self, sure, I may think, “Will my doing such and such benefit someone else?”

But honestly, I have to train myself daily to think this way. It does not come easily to me.

And this is what Jesus was pointing out.

You see, not always, but especially when I’m in an argument with my husband I tend to mentally keep score.

It goes something like this:

“I did this for you, so now you owe me.”

I don’t say those exact words, but this is the general temperature of the room.

“I served you and now you owe me.” And being married as long as we have, it goes the other way too, “You served me and now I’m indebted to you.”

So then the question becomes not: Whom are we called to serve in our daily lives, the secular world or God?

It becomes very real, “You owe me.” or “I’m indebted to you.”

And this was what Jesus was pointing out as wrongful thinking, Yes we are indebted to the government, because we live in the secular world. We have to pay our taxes. Yet, here’s the point, everything in the world belongs to God.

Everything we do, everything we receive (our health, our wealth, our joys, our faith, our hopes and dreams) comes from the one who created the world and everything in it.

We belong to God and in response God claims us as His own.

And what is more, through His only Son’s sacrifice, our debt has been paid. We are marked as God’s own forever and nothing can separate us from that relationship.

There is no such thing as us being indebted to God. This is what the Good News all about; the bill has been paid.

We serve God because He rescued us from the oppressive cycle of indebtedness we find ourselves in when we confuse serving others as a chore rather than an offering of love.

We serve God and in serving God we help each other.

We serve God not because we have to but because in serving Him we demonstrate our gratefulness for what He has done for us.

We joyfully serve God by giving ourselves to Him- all that we are, all that we have and all that we do. Without keeping score, because there is no way we can repay Him for what He has done for us.

And we lightly hold onto everything God gives us. For in the end, everything God gives us to hold onto is only ours for a short while. All things belong to Him, all things return to Him. For all things are His to cherish and take care of forever.

“Therefore give to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s and to God the things that are God’s.”

Amen.