

"The Claims Upon Us"

I Thessalonians 1:1-7; Matthew 22:15-22

Highlands Presbyterian Church, Columbus

February 19, 2017 – 7th Sunday after Epiphany – Rev. Ronald Botts

Our scripture for this morning tells how Jesus is confronted one day by two groups of people—an act of deliberate collusion—and the subject of their question is allegiance. Their hidden intent is more basic, however; and that is to discredit Jesus.

One group is the Pharisees, those zealous adherents of the religious Law. In their determination to bring about total compliance, they took special notice of those who advocated anything less than their strict interpretation. Jesus, to them, was such a person. They saw him as lax to an extreme.

The other partner in this “inquisition” team were the Herodians. Unlike the anti-Roman Pharisees, the Herodians were supporters of Herod Antipas, the puppet king installed by Rome in the area around Galilee. They were largely opportunists who backed the person in power in order to win favor and reward.

These were two most unlikely groups to collaborate, but whose tie was the common desire to trap Jesus in a no-win situation.

And so they pose a question to trip Jesus up, well thought out and, no doubt, well rehearsed: "Teacher, we know that you teach the truth about God's will without worrying about what people think, because you pay no attention to a person's status." (That's the complimentary part, now here comes the barb) "Tell us, then, what do you think? Is it against our Law to pay taxes to the Roman Emperor or not?"

This question was cleverly worded and sought to put Jesus in a bind so that either way he responded he would lose. If he answered "no" to the question of paying the tax, the Romans would surely hear of it and close him down. Disobedience in the occupied territories couldn't be tolerated and this rabbi of sorts would surely be made an example.

If he said "Yes, pay the tax," then the Pharisees would tar him as being disloyal to the faith. After all, the Emperor regarded himself as a god, so would not paying the tax serve to affirm his claim?

So, a clever question leading into a foolproof trap. Even if Jesus should attempt to avoid the controversy by not answering the question, he would surely lose credibility with the people. The antagonists had him in a bind, and they knew it; so much so that a certain smugness could hardly be missed in their presenting of the question.

Really, it's not so much an issue of paying taxes; though, outwardly, that is the subject. The real issue here is the matter of allegiance: who has the power and to whom is one's loyalty owed?

A movie from some years back also dealt with a similar question of loyalties, though the context is far removed from ancient Palestine. In *The Seduction of Joe Tynan*, Alan Alda portrays a popular U.S. Senator, a champion of popular causes. As the movie begins he is leading opposition to a certain Supreme Court nominee. Joe's unashamedly an idealist and, all in all, we appear to have a good person who stands up for what he believes.

As the story develops, though, either our initial impression of Joe begins to change, or he himself begins to change. We see him operating daily in the heavy pressures of Washington. It's a world filled with bargaining, trade-offs, favoritism, and compromise. The title word, seduction, tips the hand that somewhere, somehow, he is going to be taken in by someone or something.

Who or what might lure him away from everything he has stood for? What tempter might undo this man of principles? What weaknesses might lurk in the dark recesses of his character? In Joe's case it turns out to be no other than that ancient allure, power: the desire to acquire it and then the desire to expand it. Conversely, it also becomes the fear of losing it. The draw of power is to be found everywhere but, around election times, we think of it especially in connection with politics.

It's no secret that Joe Tynan is flattered when it's suggested that he is Presidential material. Can he not feel a bit superior when his staff boosts him up at every turn? Is he not bolstered by a press corps which hangs on his every word? Does he not feel superior when he walks to the convention podium through a corridor of thousands of cheering delegates?

And yet, even here, power is essentially neutral; intrinsically it's neither good nor bad. Everything comes down to its application. The problem for many people is that their desire for personal power can cause them to compromise their ideals and change their loyalties. Power, at any cost, can corrupt even the best of people. Power in various forms continually tried to tempt Jesus to deviate from the path he knew he must take.

"Tell us, then, what do you think? Is it against our Law to pay taxes to the Roman Emperor or not?"

[He said] "Show me the coin for paying the Tax." They brought him the coin, and he asked them, "Whose face and name are these?"

"The Emperor's," they answered.

So Jesus said to them, "Well, then, pay to the Emperor what belongs to the Emperor, and pay to God what belongs to God."

This is really quite an extraordinary reply. It's an answer and a non-answer all in one. Because Jesus replied without a "yes" or "no," it completely turns the tables on the questioners.

You can almost see those self-assured smiles drop from their faces. They were totally confident that they had Jesus trapped. There would be no way he could slide out of the snare

they had concocted. And yet he answers with such a perfect response that, as the account continues, "When they heard it they were amazed; and they left him and went away."

What else could they do in that situation? Their amazement, their befuddlement, was perhaps not so much with the answer itself, but that they had allowed themselves to be outsmarted. Jesus' response leaves them without anything they can say. The confrontation is totally reversed. The real importance, though is not the cleverness of Jesus' answer, but in the truth to which he points.

The question, as posed, asks ultimately, "Who has a claim upon my life?" Is it the government who has a claim? Is it my family? My job? Could it be my ambitions or personal fulfillment? Is it God?... Which one claims me? To whom do I owe my loyalty?

Surprisingly, perhaps, Jesus implies in his answer that they **all** have a claim upon us—the government, family, job, personal aspirations, God. The challenge for each person then is to sort out all those allegiances so they can be put in correct priority.

In the play *You Can't Take It with You*, Grandpa Vanderhof is visited by an Internal Revenue Service agent. The agent demands of Grandpa why he hasn't paid any income tax for the last 22 years. To which the old man replies, "I didn't figure I owed the government anything!"

Well, of course, he does and we all do. Despite our frustration with how things operate sometimes, we realize that life without governing structures would be nothing short of chaos... sort of like having a banking industry without regulation. So we owe our nation something and it costs us a part of what we earn. Our country does have its rightful claim upon us. Does that claim, however, extend to a blind obedience to believe or do whatever we're told?

No doubt our employer has a legitimate claim upon us for, after all, we are being paid to do a certain job. We owe something here. Does that mean, however, that we should leave our ethics at the business door because the company encourages us to do so?

Surely our families have a natural claim upon us. They should; we ought to take these basic responsibilities seriously. And yet, even here, might there be times when the need of a friend or neighbor ought to take precedence over those closer to us?

And then where do we fit God into our lives? What is **God's** claim upon us?

Jesus' answer was this: "Give to the Emperor what belongs to the Emperor. Give to God what belongs to God." The question as posed asks about allegiance: who has the power and to whom is one's ultimate loyalty owed?

What Jesus tells the questioners is to go and give the emperor the coin, for his likeness is upon it. "Give him back what is his; it is but a small claim upon you, almost insignificant. Instead, consider first what you owe to the one who has given you life itself. Then do accordingly. Begin with God, and let all your other obligations flow naturally from this starting point."

The lure of power and control is seductive. Jesus knew that. He also understood that the claims on us in life are many and confusing. So to "give to God what belongs to God" means no less than to give one's highest loyalty to the Lord's claim upon us and to prioritize everything else accordingly... above job, above country, above family, above personal ambitions. They each have their claims on us, rightful ones, but God's claim on us is the defining one. It is a matter of priority.

To "give to God what belongs to God" is to see the world in its proper relationships. It is also to know that when we pray, "For thine is the Kingdom, and the power, and the glory," that the power we associate with God will also be the source of our power in life as well.

Our lesson for today encourages us to give to others what is rightly due to them, but only after first giving to God what indeed belongs to God. Starting from there everything else will fall into place and we can move forward with our priorities straight.