

The Diocese of New Jersey On-Line Sermon  
20 Pentecost – Proper 24 – Year A – October 18, 2020 – Stewardship Sunday  
1 Thessalonians 1:1-10; Matthew 22:15 – 22  
Preacher: The Right Reverend William H. Stokes, *Bishop of New Jersey*

*Think of us in this way, as servants of Christ and stewards of God's mysteries. Moreover, it is required of stewards that they be found trustworthy" 1 Cor. 4:1-2*

These words apply to us all today. God has entrusted us with much and called us to be “trustworthy.” Sunday, October 18 has been designated Stewardship Sunday for the Diocese of New Jersey. Today, I want us all to pray and reflect upon our roles as “stewards of God’s mysteries;” to give thanks for all that God has entrusted to us. I want us to consider how God is calling us to live more deeply into our role of being stewards in this strange, new COVID19 landscape in which we are still called to carry out God’s mission of reconciliation and love.

Today’s Gospel reading offers us a pointed opportunity in which to engage in this prayer and reflection about our role as God’s stewards, our role individually and corporately, as “trustees” of all that has been placed in our care by God. Some want to make it just about money, but it’s about a lot more than that. Let’s start by taking a look at the Gospel reading from Matthew 22.

If you’ve been in church the past few weeks, or worshipped with one of our churches on-line, you know that in the gospel reading, Jesus has been engaging in a dispute with religious leaders on the Temple Mount, the most Sacred place in Judaism. Jesus engages them in a battle of wits, tells a series of pointed parables directed against them.<sup>1</sup> They are bested by him and appear to fade into the background. In truth, they are enlarging the net with which they are trying to entrap Jesus. They send others to do their dirty work – some Pharisees and Herodians. These are strange bedfellows.

You see, the Pharisees were faithful Jews and strict observers of the Torah. They despised the Roman occupation and everything to do with it. The Herodians, on the other hand, were supporters of Herod and his family; puppet-rulers under the Roman thumb. They were cooperators and collaborators with Caesar and the Empire. Here, however, some Pharisees and Herodians unite with the other religious leaders to focus their attention on a common problem, Jesus of Nazareth. Matthew makes it clear for us. They are out to “entrap Jesus in what he says” (Mt. 22:15).

*"Teacher, we know that you are sincere, and teach the way of God in accordance with truth, and show deference to no one; for you do not regard people with partiality." Don't be fooled by their flattering words. It's a set-up. They are smarmy, unctuous. "Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?" (Matthew 22:15-17).*

Bang, the trap is sprung! Biblical scholar N.T. Wright observes, “The issue of paying tax to the Roman emperor was one of the hottest topics in the Middle East of Jesus’ day.”<sup>2</sup> Why?

If Jesus says yes, it’s lawful to pay the taxes, the tribute to the emperor, meaning lawful under Jewish law, under the Torah, Jesus will lose credibility and popular standing with the people who are visceral in their opposition to Rome and its occupation of their country. If, on the other hand, Jesus says it is unlawful to pay the taxes, then he risks being charged with sedition and Rome was very hard on seditionists, as Jesus’ later crucifixion clearly illustrates. The question posed by the Pharisees and the Herodians appears to offer him no good choice.

But Jesus knows what they are up to. *"Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites? Show me the coin used for the tax."* They brought him a denarius (Matthew 22:18 – 19). The denarius was a silver Roman coin engraved with an image of the Emperor's head. On it were words that referred to the Emperor as the "Son of God" and "Pontifex Maximus" the "Greatest Priest" of the Roman Religion." The fact that these religious authorities are in possession of this idolatrous coin on Judaism's most sacred ground is the height of hypocrisy!<sup>3</sup>

In asking for the coin, Jesus has sprung his own trap. Biblical scholar N.T. Wright notes, "...asking them for a coin is really the beginning of his answer, the start of a strategic out-flanking move....they are showing that they themselves are handling the hated currency."<sup>4</sup>

To press the point home, *Jesus asked them, "Whose head is this, and whose title?" They answered, "The emperor's."* (Matthew 22:20) *Jesus said to them, "Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's"* (Matthew 22:21).

It is a brilliant, the perfect response. As one source notes, "They are trapped by him. Jesus' words distance him from those who oppose supporting Rome. At the same time, the inclusion of giving to God what is God's relativizes the political obligation."<sup>5</sup> As Roman Catholic scholars Curtis Mitch and Edward Sri observe, "Jesus implicitly subordinates the claims of Caesar to the claims of God."<sup>6</sup>

We should pause here to ask about the implications of this for our own times. What are the demands God makes of us as disciples of Jesus Christ in our current political and economic climate? Just as there was no coin, no person, or anything else in Caesar's reign that did not first belong to God, so in our realm all belongs to God as well, and all matters concern God, including how each and every person is treated by our political and socio economic systems.

In Greek the words "stewardship" and "steward" are *oikonomia* and *oikonomos*. It is, as author Bob Sitze writes, "God's ordering, God's will...God's plan to reconcile the world to God's self, *oikonomia* as "God's desire to save the world through Jesus Christ."<sup>7</sup> To be a disciple of Jesus Christ is to be a *steward*, a *trustee*, of God's economy, of God's justice, of God's mission and ministry of reconciliation.<sup>8</sup> The common good is not merely a political value, it is a Christian imperative.

Occasionally, people use the biblical phrase "render to Caesar the things that are Caesars" to try to suggest the nation's politics are something outside of, or beyond God's care and concern, that God and our faith should not intrude into our politics. The problem with this argument is that our politics, defined as "the total complex of relations between people living in a society,"<sup>9</sup> address vitally important moral and societal issues, issues that the Bible makes clear are profoundly important to God, issues like justice, idolatry, care of the poor and the weak – again, God's "economy."

In these matters, Caesar doesn't take priority over God; God takes priority over Caesar. Our pledge of allegiance makes this priority clear when we say "one nation *under God*." While as church, we must always be cautious about being overtly "partisan," we cannot avoid being concerned and engaged with politics as these affect us all in profoundly moral and ethical ways. Nonetheless, our engagement must always be marked by love and respect for the dignity of all human beings and driven by biblical priorities. Jesus' Golden Rule applies, "In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets." (Matthew 7:12).

As we continue to struggle with the questions that confront us in our society and around the world - questions about the biblical priorities of justice, fairness, human dignity - it is important to ask, what belongs to Caesar and Caesar's kingdom that does not first belong to God and God's kingdom? Which are we serving? Which ought we to serve?

And this gets us back to St. Paul and his letter to the Church in Corinth: *Think of us in this way, as servants of Christ and stewards of God's mysteries. Moreover, it is required of stewards that they be found trustworthy*" (1 Cor. 4:1-2).

As members of the body of Christ, baptized persons in Christ's name and love, our first call is always to be stewards, "trustees" of God's mysteries – all God's mysteries – the mysteries of life, and love; the mysteries of the faith and its repository: the Church, to be stewards of this planet that God has entrusted to our care.

Mitch and Sri write, "What is it that belongs to God? It is the human person that bears the image of the living God (Genesis 1:26-27). So our highest obligation in life – and one that is imposed on every man, woman and child, regardless of nationality or citizenship – is to give ourselves back to God."<sup>10</sup> Our participation in the life of the church, and of our congregations, our "gifts" of time, talent and treasure are really a return to God of what God has first given to us as grace and gift.

What is ours that does not first belong to God? Nothing. Literally nothing. We are God's stewards, God's "trustees." Everything we have, everything we are, including our very selves, our own bodies, is given to us by God as an act of grace; we hold it all in trust for God. God and God's love calls us to use it all for God's own purposes, the spreading of God's love and the building of God's reign.

In our current COVID19 environment, stewardship questions and challenges will require particular focus, prayer and response from all of us. Our response to God's call to us, God's commissioning us a "stewards" and "trustees" of the divine economy should be our joy and sacred obligation. God has called us into life with one another and into life with God's very self through the church. This too is part of God's economy.

The First Letter of Peter expresses it perfectly: *"Like good stewards of the manifold grace of God, serve one another with whatever gift each of you has received. Whoever speaks must do so as one speaking the very words of God; whoever serves must do so with the strength that God supplies, so that God may be glorified in all things through Jesus Christ. To him belong the glory and the power forever and ever. Amen* (1 Peter 4:10 – 11).

Thank you for being faithful stewards, trustees, of God's sacred mysteries and of God's whole economy. May God strengthen you all in this role and in this trust, bless you and may you continue to give Christ honor and glory in all things.

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<sup>1</sup> As with many other churches, The Episcopal Church uses the [Revised Common Lectionary](#) for its Sunday morning readings. We are currently using Lectionary Year "A" in which there is focus on the Gospel of Matthew. The appointed Gospel reading for Sunday, September 27, 2020 was Matthew 21:23-32; for Sunday, October 4, 2020 it was Matthew 21:33-46 and for Sunday, October 11, 2020 it was Matthew 22:1-14.

<sup>2</sup> Wright, N.T. *Matthew for Everyone – Part 2* (London: SPCK Publishing Co., 2002) Kindle location 1453

<sup>3</sup> See Hare, Douglas *Interpretation – A Bible Commentary for Preaching and Teaching: Matthew* Hare, Douglas (Louisville: Westminster – John Knox Press, 1993) 254.

<sup>4</sup> Wright, 1459.

<sup>5</sup> *The Oxford Bible Commentary* ed. John Barton and John Muddiman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001)

<sup>6</sup> Mitch, Curtis and Sri, Edward *Catholic Commentary on Sacred Scripture: The Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2010) Kindle location 5893

<sup>7</sup> Sitze, Bob "Economia: A Short History of Stewardship Theology and Practice" from *Stewardshift: An Economia for Congregational Change* (New York: Morehouse Publishing, 2016), 17

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<sup>8</sup> Sitze refers to the work of Leonard Sweet, suggesting that the Greek words would be better understood by post-modern minds if translated as “trustee” – see Sitze, p. 17.

<sup>9</sup> See “politics” Merriam Websters Collegiate Dictionary – 10<sup>th</sup> Edition, p.901.

<sup>10</sup> Mitch and Sri, Kindle location 5900