

17th Sunday after Pentecost Year A  
October 16, 2011  
St. Luke Sheboygan Falls  
Matthew 22:15-22

"You are Mine."

Let us pray. Lord, assure us always that we belong to you. AMEN.

While there may be many people who don't enjoy paying taxes to the government there are few who would ask the question that the Pharisees attempt to stump Jesus with in today's gospel. ***"Is it lawful to pay taxes or not?"*** In Jesus' context, the Roman Emperor, known as Caesar demanded to be worshipped as a god which for ancient Jews would have clearly been against their religion.

So, do we dismiss the reading as irrelevant to today's world? Certainly not! From the Tea Party movement to "Occupy Wall Street", our society has become possessed by money and possessions more than ever. From the rich CEO who wonders,

"How will I preserve and protect MY wealth" to the single, working mom who struggles with "How will I feed my kids?" the focus is on the distribution of money—"how do I stretch my dollars?" "How do I get away with paying as little in taxes as possible?" "It's only fair to keep my hard-earned money." "Where is the justice in losing benefits after years in the same job?" These are the kinds of issues we invest our lives in.

Recently on facebook one of my "friends" posted a question as his status: ***"How do you determine the difference between right and wrong?"*** A good question, worth asking. One person replied, ***"WWJD?"*** What would Jesus do? Again, an excellent moral guide.

In that case, it would be great if Jesus was always crystal clear about what he wanted his followers to do. Some would love it if Jesus said, "Don't pay taxes at all.

I'm against Big Government." Or "Make sure that tax money goes to programs that will help the poor and needy, not line the pockets of corporate America." Clearly, as much as we'd love him to, Jesus doesn't take sides here.

Instead, Jesus chose to raise an entirely different issue. The money we have and all that goes with it—possessions, status are not truly ours to begin with. He does this with a question of his own about the coin that is used to pay the tax. ***"Whose head is this and whose title?" "The emperor's."*** the Pharisees reply. Then Jesus declares: ***"Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's."***

The simplest answer would be to assume that Jesus was saying that the people should pay taxes to Caesar because his image was on the money. But then the question is, what belongs to God?

I believe that solution would be selling Jesus short. He surely knew that the inscription on the coin proclaimed that Caesar was not just the emperor, but that he was god. Possessing the coin begged a question, "Who do you belong to? The living God who created all things or the dead god in your pocket?"

In essence, Jesus was saying that it's fine to use "Caesar's" money to pay the tax as long as long as you don't allow that action to have an eternal weight and significance in your life. As Christians we should understand that our ultimate allegiance belongs to God and not any government or ruler.

Honestly, in today's world, I don't think that is as much of a problem as it was in Jesus' day. We don't worship our leaders in the same way.

What we DO worship and we DO allow to possess us are the money and the possessions themselves. As soon as we label something “MINE” it has the power to control our lives.

When we choose our profession by the amount of money we’ll be able to make does that guarantee us happiness? When we go into debt to have a bigger home, a status symbol car or to please another person with expensive trinkets does it cause less or more stress in our lives? When you think of all of your “favorite” things are any of them truly yours? Or are they merely on loan from a generous and gracious God?

We are only caretakers, stewards of the gifts—the money, stuff and relationships that God places in our lives. We can’t possess anything lest these things possess us. “Only God can say ‘MINE.’

When God says ‘You are mine’ we are freed from being possessed...by anything else.”

When we trust in that identity as beloved children of God we may begin to trust the Holy Spirit to lead us and guide in making the hard choices about what is good and right and true to do with gifts we have been given. We are freed to use the lens of our giftedness to evaluate all of life and to give back to God not only money and stuff, but ultimately our whole lives and our whole selves. AMEN.