

All Saint's, Parma, October 19, 2008, Proper 24, Year A

There is one word in the English language that has the power to elect politicians to high office, finance armies, cause economic hardship, and can drive you crazy in April of every year. The word is taxes. Taxes have been a centerpiece in the campaigns of both Barack Obama and John McCain. We all heard about Joe the plumber in the presidential debates last week. If we didn't watch the debate we heard all about in the media afterwards. Joe was concerned his taxes would be raised. Under Obama's plan McCain claimed they would be raised. Those tax and spend Democrats would send you to the poor house! Interestingly I read in the New York Times this past week an analysis that showed Joe's taxes would be reduced by either tax plan. It turns out Joe wasn't making as much as both candidates were led to believe.

We have all heard the familiar saying that there are only two things certain in life: death and taxes. No question, we don't like paying taxes. There is a story about an IRS agent who made a phone call to one of the leading clergy in a small town. He said to the minister, "Mr. Bob Smith put down on his tax return that he donated \$3,000 to your church last year. Can you verify that?" After a brief pause on the other end of the line, the minister responded, "If he didn't, he will."

Today's gospel is about taxes: our obligation to pay them, but also the obligation we have toward God. In today's gospel we see a devious plan by the Pharisees to trip up Jesus. They do this by asking a question to which there is no good answer. The question to Jesus was: "Shall we pay taxes to the Romans or not?" They weren't talking about any tax. They were talking about the census tax on personal property and agricultural land that provided the money to subjugate the Jewish people. This tax was levied during a census to be sure that everyone who owed the tax paid it. It was this tax that sent a pregnant Mary and her husband Joseph from Nazareth to Bethlehem in 6 or 7 AD after a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world be taxed. It was a tax hated by the Hebrew people because it was used for the Roman armies that oppressed them and to finance public works for the benefit of their oppressors.

The Pharisees didn't ask this question about taxes because they weren't sure of the answer. Their purpose was rather to trap Jesus. The question had no really good answer. To answer either yes or no would create serious problems for Jesus. If he said yes, he would be seen as a traitor to his own people who hated the tax. If he said, "No, don't pay the tax," he would soon be arrested for high treason and his ministry would be suddenly over. Jesus' response was brilliant. "Show me the coin used to pay the tax." They give him a coin. Jesus apparently had no money on him.

“Whose image in on the coin?” They reply, “The Emperor’s.” Then we get Jesus’ famous reply: “Give the Emperor what is the Emperor’s and give to God what belongs to God.” His interrogators are left speechless. Neither his followers or the civil authorities are alienated by his answer.

Jesus simply and profoundly declares that Caesar is owed what bears his image and name, namely money. Taxes are necessary for the government to function. Jesus is not drawn into a debate about the separation of church and state. He acknowledges that being a servant of God does not exempt you from being a tax-paying servant of the state. Jesus emphasizes, however, that the higher duty is to be rendered to God. Worldly governments pass away, but God endures. No man can serve two masters. We have, therefore, an legitimate obligation to the state, but we have a greater obligation to God. In other words, the Cross comes before the flag. It used to be common in Episcopal Churches to have the Cross lead the procession in and out of the church on Sundays, which continues today, but often the procession would end with the American flag, often joined with the Episcopal Church flag. Here, literally, the cross came before the flag.

This God for whom primary allegiance is demanded is a generous God. God is a God who gives us more than we desire or deserve. All that we are, and all that we have, are gifts from God. Joy Cowley has written:

I think it helps when I remember just whose earth this really is.
 It’s a truth that everything I have, including myself, is a gift from God.
 Nothing can be earned, nothing owned, nothing labeled with my name.
 When I remember that, my heart shift focus.
 I lose sight of the “my” and “mine” of material possessions.
 And I reach out to worship not the gifts but the giver.

This is why at the 8:30 service when the offerings are brought up to altar we all say, “All things come of Thee, Oh Lord, and of Thine own have we given Thee.”

Let me tell you another story. There was once a lovely estate in Georgia. Its beautiful grounds were expertly tended by a caretaker. Every tree was trimmed, the grass was mowed, the stately flower beds were in bloom. Yet no one was around to observe this beauty except the caretaker. A visitor stopped by one day to see the beautiful sight and asked out of curiosity, “When was the owner last here?” “Oh, ten or twelve years ago, I guess.” “Does he come around and inspect the place?” “No I can’t say he does.” “And yet you keep it trim as if he was going to come tomorrow.” The gardener interjects, “As if he was going to be here today!”

This is what stewardship is all about. Tending and caring for this world that God has given us, and returning to God a portion of what God has given us. This time

of year many congregations are doing their annual stewardship campaign. It is a time when all of us are reminded to render to God what is God's in the form of a pledge. Today is Commitment Sunday. This is an important day, however stewardship is not something just done once a year when we are asked to make a pledge for the coming year. It is a year round process. Stewardship is in fact everything we do after we say "I believe."

Giving back to God a percentage of what God has given us in material things is a challenge always before us. Continually the Christ calls us to give to give back to God what is God's, namely all that we are and all that we have. We are called to a total commitment that comes before all else in life. This is very counter-cultural. Our society values power, money, prestige, and many work to achieve these things. We acquire these things by hard work, with our own effort. We worked hard and the rewards have come through our own efforts.

After my graduation from seminary I spent two years in parish ministry, and discovered that it was not a good fit for me. I returned to graduate school and earned a masters in health care administration. I spent most of my career before retirement in nonprofit hospitals and nursing homes as an administrator. In spite of being nonprofit, I can tell you that hospitals are places where money, power and prestige are highly valued and sought after. I got sucked into taking on these values in very subtle ways. It took a conversion experience to realize these values are not God's values. Instead of hanging on to things, I discovered the joy of giving things away.

As Christians we have to take a stand against this attitude of it belongs to me because I earned it. To believe this goes against what Jesus has taught us. Jesus calls us to render to God the things that are God's and to accept the fact that nothing can be owned, nothing can be earned, nothing labeled with our own names. Nothing in this world belongs to us. Everything is a gift from God. When we come to this understanding the greatest satisfaction in life comes from giving back, not acquiring. Will we be remembered for the size of our bank account or the size of our house? I think not. Giving of our time and our treasure is what it means to render unto God the things that are God's. This is what Jesus calls us to do.

Let us pray: Almighty God, whose loving hand has given us all that we possess: Grant us grace that we may honor you with our substance, and, remembering the account which we must one day give, may be faithful stewards of your bounty, thorough Jesus Christ our Lord. AMEN.