

The Rev. Duane A. Jesse, Senior Pastor
Zion Lutheran Church, Youngstown, Ohio

Weekend of Sunday, October 18, 2020
20th Sunday after Pentecost/Lectionary 29/Proper 24/Year A

First Reading: Isaiah 45:1-7

Second Reading: 1 Thessalonians 1:1-10

Gospel Reading: Matthew 22:15-22

Sermon Title: “*What Gift Do You Give to the One Who Has Everything?*”

Theme

After Jesus begins teaching in the temple, religious leaders try to trap him with questions. First they ask if God’s people should pay taxes to an earthly tyrant like Caesar.

Text

¹⁵Then the Pharisees went and plotted to entrap [Jesus] in what he said. ¹⁶So they sent their disciples to him, along with the Herodians, saying, “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. ¹⁷Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?” ¹⁸But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, “Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites? ¹⁹Show me the coin used for the tax.” And they brought him a denarius. ²⁰Then he said to them, “Whose head is this, and whose title?” ²¹They answered, “The emperor’s.” Then he said to them, “Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s.” ²²When they heard this, they were amazed; and they left him and went away.

Sermon

I am sure you can all relate to this. I loved my paternal grandmother and after my grandfather passed away and she got older she downsized and moved into a senior apartment. She took the things of her life that she could use and that mattered most and gave away the rest. My family and I would always stop in to see her when we were in Ft. Wayne and especially at Christmas time. Each year, Carol and I would fuss over what to give Grandma for Christmas. She needed nothing, wanted nothing, and had shed a lot of those personal possessions we collect over a lifetime. We eventually settled on consumables like candy and holiday candles which she seemed to enjoy.

Many of you ask about my mother so this is a good time to bring you up to date on some news about her. She has moved! She has moved out of her house and into a senior apartment complex with access to greater care as her needs increase. My siblings and I are thrilled. I've been there to assist in the move three times in the last few weeks and what is left that she didn't need or want and the house will be auctioned off on October 24.

Now the reason I tell you this is 1) because you are kind enough to be concerned about the things that I am concerned about, and 2) because I now have an intimate knowledge of her stuff. She is now in the situation I told you about with my grandmother. She has everything she can use (and more!) and those things that matter most, and the rest will be disposed of. And 3) both of these stories set the stage for this sermon that I have entitled, *“What Gift Do You Give to the One Who Has Everything?”* The fact is, I do know a couple of things that I can get my mother for Christmas this year that will make her new life in her new home easier, but the question remains, *“What Gift Do You Give to the One Who Has Everything?”*

The reason this question is the question of the day is because of the way Jesus ended the passage that is our Gospel Reading for today.

As has been the pattern these last several weeks, the context for the passage is still likely Monday of Holy Week. Jesus has offended the Chief Priests and the leaders of the people through his parables that he told about them. They went away seething, to plot against him. And this passage for today was their latest attempt to

entrap him. Thinking they could trick Jesus by sending some of their underlings and some Herodians, they set up a trap.

Herodians may be a new or not well-known group to you. Bible scholars think that they may have been a party or faction among the Jews that were supportive of the rule and policies of Herod Antipas, the ruler of Judea at the time. This is important because of the trap they set.

And that trap was to show Jesus some false respect and interest in his wisdom and then ask him a controversial question – one that will get him into trouble no matter how he answered. So they asked,

¹⁶“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. ¹⁷Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?”

Now the Herodians want him to say “no,” and from there they could bring charges of insurrection against him.

And the minions of the Pharisees, who were known for their observance of the Law, wanted him to say “yes,” because, in their opinion, it would have been acknowledging the rulership of the Gentile Romans over them. Something that they could have used as a wedge issue between Jesus and the Jews.

But Jesus, as always, was aware of their trickery and was too smart for them. And I have to say, his answer was brilliant, don't you think. He asked to see the coin used for the tax. What is that about you ask? I am so glad you did.

Do you recall the incident that Jesus caused just yesterday (Palm Sunday in gospel time) when he turned over the "money-changers" in the courtyard of the Temple? You may recall that the reason that "money-changers" were in the Temple courtyard at the time of the Passover in the first place was because of the prohibition against "graven images" referenced in Exodus (20:4). A graven image could be considered an idol and an idol would make an unacceptable offering and so there were "money-changers" present to take global currency and turn it into Temple currency.

So then, when Jesus asked to see the coin used to pay the Roman tax, they showed him a denarius emblazoned with the Emperor's head on it. So Jesus simply replied, 'Give to the Emperor the things that are the emperors.' And that was clever, but then to the heart of my sermon, he continued, 'and give to God the things that are God's.' Brilliant!

His adversaries didn't know what to do with that answer, and Matthew wrote, ²²When they heard this, they were amazed; and they left him and went away.

Jesus' response, 'give to God the things that are God's,' take me back to the question that is my sermon title, "*What Gift Do You Give to the One Who Has Everything?*" If we are to give to the Emperor, the things that are the emperor's, what do we give to God – when God is the one who created everything, and therefore kinda owns everything? What do you give God?

It's a good question, isn't it? Just thinking out loud with you here, I think that if his adversaries had truly been interested in what Jesus had to say, that would have been a great follow-up question. We will get Jesus' response to their unspoken question next week when Jesus quoted Deuteronomy when he was asked,

^{22:36}“Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?” ³⁷He said to him, “ “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ ³⁸This is the greatest and first commandment. ³⁹And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ ⁴⁰On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”

I hope I don't ruin my own sermon for next week, this week, but the answer to the question, "*What Gift Do You Give to the One Who Has Everything?*" is love, our total sold-out love with all our heart, mind, and soul, manifested and demonstrated in love for neighbor and self.

Like my grandmother or my mother, there really isn't anything I can get them for as a gift that they want or need. More than anything else, they would appreciate my attention – a phone call or a visit – so that they know they aren't forgotten - so they know they are loved.

More than anything else, God craves our attention. Twice in Exodus, when God was forming God's chosen people, God described God's self as jealous:

Exodus 20:5 "I the LORD your God am a jealous God"

Exodus 34:14 "the LORD, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God."

Raisin' the Bar Challenge

So let's give God what God wants. And what God wants is our love, our total sold-out love with all our heart, mind, and soul, manifested and demonstrated in love for neighbor and self.

Prayer

Majestic and all-powerful God, how much more clear can you be with us? You crave our love and attention more than anything, and you love to see that devotion lived out through love of self and love of others – so simple and yet so complicated. Free us from the complications we create and make us love you as we ought to love. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen