

Sermon: The Things That Are God's

New North Church, Hingham

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Based on **Exodus 33:12-23; Matthew 22:15-22**

For the past three weeks or so, we have been following along with Jesus as he told one parable after another, each one a little more forceful than the last, all while speaking directly to the chief priests and Pharisees who were supposed to be the defenders and teachers of the faith, the keepers of the Temple.

At the same time, we've been wandering around in the wilderness with the ancient Israelites who were only recently brought up out of Egypt by God's saving actions. Each week, we have heard stories whose central question was, "Is the Lord in our midst or not?" Moses had his hands full, that's for sure.

Last week's Gospel reading ended with Jesus saying, "For many are called, but few are chosen." Today, Matthew picks up where he left off by saying that *then* the Pharisees went and plotted to entrap Jesus in what he said.

It may be that the Pharisees themselves had had enough of Jesus because they sent their disciples – Pharisee interns, really – and 'the Herodians' for the next round. Herodians were associated with the royal family, of course, and therefore with the Roman occupiers. They would probably benefit when people paid their taxes.

In theory, as religious leaders, the Pharisees should have opposed the tax, at least publicly. So, Pharisee disciples and Herodians coming together in the Temple says more about their mutual dislike of Jesus than it does about their opposite views of the tax.

The tax in question was called a *census*, and everyone paid it, beginning in 6 BCE when Judea became a Roman province, so about 25 years before this moment in the Temple; some taxes just never go away. The amount paid equaled one denarius, the usual daily wage for a common laborer.

Now, the people resented this tax for two reasons: first, being taxed at all by Rome was irritating, but the coin also bore an image of the emperor on its face, making the tax both politically and religiously offensive, to the extent that you had to exchange

your Roman money first before you could buy a sacrificial animal. Roman money in the Temple is why Jesus flipped the moneychanger's tables the moment he arrived.

So, does Torah law allow the payment of taxes to pagan emperors? That's the question the Pharisee interns and the Herodians asked Jesus, intending to trap him. They figure he will either lose his spiritual authority if he said it was appropriate to pay the tax, or he will brand himself a political agitator and be subject to arrest if he opposed the tax.

As is typical of Jesus, he doesn't answer the question but instead turns it around to expose the hypocrisy of his questioners. It would be highly unusual for a Pharisee to be carrying Roman money around, so the coin shown to Jesus must have been in the pocket of one of the Herodians. Either way, it should not have been in the Temple.

You may remember Thomas Riley Marshall who once said, "What this country needs is a really good five-cent cigar."¹ He said this while listening to a long-winded speech in the Senate. Marshall served as governor of Illinois (1908-1913) and as Vice-President under Woodrow Wilson (1913-1921). When he retired from the Vice-Presidency, he said of the Senate, "I have been in the cave of winds. I need a rest."

Why do we recall Thomas Riley Marshall today? No good reason, really. Except to say that we sometimes get lost in the details of our daily lives, or when we look to the future at the expense of our current situation, or if we only do those things that will look good on our resumé's. Marshall reminds us that we can always use more common sense.

In 1956 President Eisenhower approved a Joint Resolution of the 84th Congress declaring "In God We Trust" as the official national motto of the United States of America. This motto first appeared on the 1864 two-cent coin, and the motto has been in continuous use on the penny since 1909, and on the dime since 1916. It has also appeared on all gold and silver coins struck since July 1, 1908.²

These coins are and have always been intended for commerce. We trade them back and forth in exchange for goods and services and so forth, and we can even use them to pay our taxes. The IRS *loves* to get bags of coins every April 15.

Putting "In God We Trust" on our coins seems as clear a statement of where our priorities should really lie as did Marshall's five-cent cigar comment in the Senate.

This is not the same as engraving the emperor's face on a coin with the inscription, "Tiberias Caesar, august and divine son of Augustus, high priest."

What are the things that are the emperor's? Tax payments in the form of tiny silver coins. Tax money bought Judea Rome's protection but that wouldn't mean anything if her citizens started preaching treason. So, really, paying their taxes was a form of extortion. We can imagine the emperor saying something like, "That's a nice little province you got there; be a shame if anything happened to it."

What are the things that are God's? Our lives as faithful servants loyally living into the covenant, for one. We're talking about two different kingdoms, although the two are not comparable, because everything – especially humans – belongs to God. Jesus could very well have said, "The emperor can have your money, but not your self."

Let's talk about Moses. We used to talk about this passage back in seminary.

The Bible and our personal experience are the two ways we learn about God's character. From Scripture, we have lately learned that God's wrath can burn hot, but that God can relent; that God's steadfast love for us endures; that God can be gracious and merciful. Today, we learn that God has a sense of humor, or is at least playful.

The verse immediately before today's reading began says, "the Lord used to speak to Moses face to face, as one speaks to a friend." Thomas Aquinas wrote that, "When Scripture states that He spoke to him face to face, this is to be understood as expressing the opinion of the people, who thought that Moses was speaking with God, mouth to mouth."³ But it was a spiritual communication between God and man.

Moses wants to know all about God, but God will only show Moses what he can actually know and comprehend, and still live. This is what Moses means when he says, "Show me your glory."

The Bible assumes that God has a human form because we are made in God's image. So, God tells Moses you can see my glory, but you cannot see my face. By covering Moses with a hand while passing by, God is protecting Moses. God says, you can see my back, literally meaning 'the back of me.'

If my front is my face from head to toe, so my back is also from head to toe. But a *very* loose translation of 'the back of me' could mean 'behind.' God is telling Moses, "You cannot see my face while my glory passes by, so I will moon you instead."

The Bible, for me, despite any typos that may have crept in over the years, and despite translation issues that crop up here and there, is true. And I say this because *no*

one would make up stories like these about their god. In other ancient cultures, gods were born through violent means and they sought to enslave their human subjects.

But for the Israelites, on the other hand, God is God and there is no other. They walked with a gracious and merciful God. In fact, because God walked with him and the Israelites, Moses revealed some anxiety about standing out among the nations when he said to the Lord, “‘We shall be distinct’ if you go with us.”

And with Jesus, who would follow an itinerant preacher who spoke in parables that provoked people into wanting to kill him? In Jesus, we recognize the same merciful, gracious, and redemptive presence made known to Israel through Moses. But he needed to use subversive methods to teach us how to prepare the way for the kingdom of God.

Our challenge is to decide what we owe and to whom, and for what. There is the world as it is and the world toward which God points us, and sometimes they make an uncomfortable fit for those who know they owe everything to God. Our call is to live faithfully in both worlds knowing that God is revealed but remains a mystery.

Amen.

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¹ <https://fromthemousehole.weebly.com/what-this-country-needs-is-a-good-5-cent-cigar.html>, accessed 15 October 2020.

² <https://statesymbolsusa.org/symbol-or-officially-designated-item/state-motto/god-we-trust>, accessed 15 October 2020.

³ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Part II, Second Part, Q. XCVIII, art. 3.