

“Render unto God Joy”
Matthew 22:15-22
Brentwood First Presbyterian
10/5/08
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Scene 1: The Pharisees and Herodians plotted

The Pharisees and Herodians plotted. Who are the Pharisees and the Herodians?

The Pharisees are policy wonks. For them, all of life is a book of rules. They cannot see the meaning behind the rules. They are the ones who would get upset at the person who says to every rule there is an exception. Can you imagine how they feel about folks who say, “Rules are made to be broken!” Where you and I see the Bible as a huge love sonnet written for humankind, as a source of inspiration, as a written document describing God’s character and God’s plan for us, Pharisees reduce the Bible to a book of rules. For Pharisees, we are saved from our sins against each other and God, not by God but by rules. The Pharisees did not die out 2000 years ago. Some say they live among us even today. A few months ago I heard someone say, “She can out Pharisee a Pharisee!” By which the person speaking was referring to someone who favors rules over people. You, on the other hand, believe that people and God are more important than rules.

The Herodians on the other hand are loyal only to Herod, the man in political power in Palestine 2000 years ago. For Herodians, we are saved from our sins not by God but by Herod. The Herodians also did not die out 2000 years ago. They also live among us even today. We see examples of this whenever political tyrants persuade a nation to do things against God’s wishes. Adolf Hitler’s persuasion of a Christian nation to invade Europe and attempt genocide against the Jews is one example. Andrew Jackson’s persuasion of a Christian nation to relocate the Cherokees on foot in the middle of winter is another. The Herodians considered Herod the messiah. Herodians today still recognize political leaders as more relevant than God. After all, to Herodians, political leaders are not abstract. They are here in the flesh and more relevant. You, on the other hand, believe that God in the flesh of Jesus is our messiah, not the President, and not someone running for that office. We are saved from our sins against God and each other by the words of Jesus, not by the words of our political leaders.

The Pharisees and the Herodians plotted, and they set Jesus up to be at odds with paying taxes to the Roman government. But Jesus knew they were trying to trap him.

Scene 2: Jesus asked for a coin, and they brought him a denarius

The Pharisees and the Herodians know where a person puts their money is where they put their priorities. They know you can judge a person's priorities most simply by looking at their check book. So when Jesus asked for a coin, they brought him a denarius. A denarius is a silver coin, the minimum wage for a day's work 2000 years ago, and barely enough to feed a family of four. When your only income is minimum wage, then, as now, you are not able to save enough to buy a house or to invest in Wall Street. If you are living on minimum wage, you have nothing left over after feeding your family for buying a house or for investing. But you also have nothing left over for paying taxes to either the government, or to give anything back to God.

Or do you?

Some of you have heard me tell this story before. A pastor friend of mine was called to Eastminster Presbyterian a few years ago. The church is in an economically challenged neighborhood, frankly, in a Hispanic immigrant neighborhood.

There were only 12 Anglo members of his church, and they met at 8:30 on Sunday mornings in the basement, because of water damage in the upstairs sanctuary. The ceiling caved in a few years earlier, destroying a pew, with the debris still scattered on the floor of the sanctuary. No one used the building during the week.

The pastor looked around the neighborhood, and realized it was mostly Hispanic, and yet there were no Hispanic members in the congregation. So he decided to begin programs that would fill needs of the neighborhood. The church began computer literacy classes and ESL classes for the children and adults, and a safe place for the children after school. Some of the parents asked if they couldn't start having worship services in Spanish. The pastor was bilingual, and he said sure, and they started an 11AM Spanish service. Then some of the Hispanic attendees asked if they could join Eastminster. The pastor said sure. Then some of the immigrants asked why they were meeting in the basement. The pastor told them, and they said, well, what if we did rebuilt the ceiling and repaired the pews? After all, we build buildings Monday through Friday, and we burn as scrap every day materials we could use for the repair. Today, Eastminster is meeting in their refurbished sanctuary, rebuilt by undocumented immigrants whose income is less than minimum wage. All because the church decided to fulfill the needs of its economically depressed neighborhood. Who would have think it?

Our governing body, the session, was looking last Spring at how we could respond to the needs of our neighborhood. Most churches in Brentwood have a mother's day out or a preschool, with waiting lists over 100 children long. There is certainly a need for this in our neighborhood. But one of our session members, Ed Whitaker, asked, "What about a something different. Something else no one is doing? Something to help a group no one else cares about." He asked, "What about a mother's day out for autistic children?" So we called

the Autistic Foundation of Middle TN, based right here in Brentwood, and they were stunned. Seems everyone else in our community is afraid of autistic children, and no one else in our community has approached them about helping them. They took one look at our newly carpeted downstairs class rooms, and our new children's playground, our newly refurbished kitchen, and our huge lawn, and thought our facilities are perfect. No final decisions have been made, but our session is currently exploring a mother's day out for parents of autistic children as an opportunity to reach out into our community. Who knows how much this will bless God's reign at our church in the future?

Scene 3: "Render unto God what is God's"

Jesus said, "Render unto Caesar what is Caesar's and unto God what is God's!" The key here is to know what belongs to God.

Oops! The Bible tells us everything that has been created belongs to God. Every spotted cow on every hill and every star in the sky. We are but care takers of all these things that belong to God. We can actually "give" God nothing because all of creation already belongs to God.

The government wants our money, even when we have nothing left to pay. But God does not want our money. No, God wants our love and our joy. Love and joy are related to each other. They do not abide. They multiply.

My son Shane and I went to my nephew's graduation from Tulane last May. The speaker told us there were three things she wanted the graduating class to know. 1) Choose their battles. 2) Take risks. And the most important thing in my view, and the theme of today's message: Love and joy do not abide. Instead, they multiply.

She gave as an illustration when she had her first child. She loved her child, and showered all her time and all her thoughts and all her emotions on her first child. So when she found she was pregnant again, she became overwhelmed. She thought to herself, how can I divide my time and my thoughts and my emotions between two children. This is when someone told her that love and joy do not abide, they multiply.

When Jesus tells those rule-dominated Pharisees and those "my country right or wrong" Herodians to give to Caesar what is Caesars and to God what is God's, he is not advising separation of church and state, as if God does not care what Adolf Hitler or Andrew Jackson did. As if God does not care what George Bush does, or what John McCain or Barack Obama will do. He is also not advising to give 30% of our income to income taxes and 10% of our income to God. No.

We do not compartmentalize ourselves into 10% that is God's, 30% that belongs to George Bush or our next president, and 60% of our being and assets that belong to ourselves alone. No. God owns all of us. We are but caretakers of ourselves and our belongings.

Jesus is not saying 60% here and 10% there and 30% over here. He is saying give all of ourselves to God every day. He is advising us to render unto God all of our joy and all of our love every day, not just for one hour on Sundays. Because love and joy do not abide, they multiply.

But if you cannot yourself spread God's love and joy at the Downtown Presbyterian soup kitchen, and cannot yourself spread God's love and joy in third world countries like Guatemala, and cannot spread God's love and joy in the nursing home, and cannot teach, and cannot sing or play musical instruments, or landscape or maintain the church property; and you have any denarii left over after feeding your family, the church provides another way for you to spread God's love and joy. You can contribute your denarii to the safe and secure economy of God.

As we discussed, you can know a person's heart and priorities by looking at their check book. And someone else once said investing your net worth in Wall Street is like throwing good money after bad. So instead of throwing your denarii into that volatile institution called the economy of Wall Street, you can instead invest in a more secure economy. Remember that commercial that says, "I could have had a V-8?" Instead of Wall Street, you have had God!

Conclusion

Most of my pastor friends tell me they insist on knowing how much each congregation member pledges and gives to the church. Because it is in this way they know how each congregation member feels about his or her relationship to God. In this way they know who they need to affirm, and who they need to help. I disagree. I think the percentage of your income that you pledge to God on November 9, and how much you give to God, is between you and God. The only person who will know is Sandy, our church treasurer, and he is sworn to secrecy. But be advised that there is another who will know how much of yourself that you pledge and give to God. God will know. But God loves you more than you can ever know. And God's love and joy do not abide, they multiply.

Glory be to God, Hallelujah, and all God's people say ...