

**St. Andrew's Episcopal Church**  
**Proper 24**  
**October 19, 2014**  
**The Rev. Barbara Hutchinson**

Rejoice, rejoice, rejoice and give thanks, and sing.

This was the refrain of last week's closing hymn. The energy, excitement, and sense of celebration of the good news we had just received were tangible as we sang and nearly danced down the aisle.

We left the church, being redeemed people, ready to go forth in the name of Christ. Through the Word being broken open by Mo. Betsy's challenging sermon around the changing venue or appearance of the wedding banquet, by resting in the complete love of Jesus Christ, as we stretched out our arms to receive the healing we needed, by being immersed in our baptismal identity through our recitation of the Creed and through our prayers offered on behalf of others, we came away renewed in our purpose and equipped to participate more openly, more presently, more wholly, in our work place, our civic life, and in our relationships with our family and friends. This is what is supposed to happen every Sunday. We are to gather as a community, be renewed in our identity and purpose, restored in our commitment to Christ, and then sent out to do the work Christ has given us to do, in all parts of our lives.

You can imagine my delight, while the refrain was still being sung in my head on Monday morning, that the reading from The Rule of St. Benedict, focused on the centrality of Sunday worship to the rhythm of our lives. As Joan Chittister writes, "The message is clear: Sunday, the weekly celebration of creation and resurrection is always a reminder of new life, always special, always meant to take us back to the Beginning and the End, the Alpha and the Omega, the Center of life."

We got it right last week, and hopefully we do all weeks, because when we are reminded of our baptismal identity and purpose and we receive renewal and strength through the sacrament, we often discover worship becomes the focus of our lives, because it is the source of life-giving energy. The more we are drawn to worship, the deeper we are called to prayer, personal devotions, and scripture study, and the more we may find we desire a life devoted to "Being the Change You wish to see in the world." <sup>1</sup>

For when we crawl more deeply into prayer, and it becomes something more than "something I feel I should do", we often find we become more aware of our life's circumstances, we become more aware of the needs of others, we hear the cry of the poor as God hears their cries, we begin to see ourselves more a member of a

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<sup>1</sup> Mahatma Gandhi

human community, rather than a freestanding individual.<sup>2</sup> As Joan Chittister, states in her book, *Prayer: A Breath of a Soul*, “Once God takes over the heart, there is no one – no child of God in any tradition anywhere ~ who does not have claim to our heart as well as to the heart of God. We become our brother’s keeper, our sister’s best support. Our own hearts, like God’s, begin to beat with a heart for the entire human race.”

Through our life of prayer, we find union with all humankind, and I would add, all of creation, and therefore we are living more fully into the imprint of God placed upon our souls ~ we are living and reflecting into the world God’s image.

God’s image and the Emperor’s image is where the tension is placed in our gospel account today.

As with the parables we have been exploring recently, there are many different slides through which we can view this story and a variety of levels we can plunge into in order to find the truth.

At a very surface level, when Jesus says, “Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s and give to God the things which are God’s”, one can understand a dualism of realms – the spiritual and the worldly, with an intentional divide among them. Those who view the scripture passage in this way, translate it to believe there is to be complete separation between church and state. When I grew up, there were two topics which were considered taboo to discuss: religion and politics ~ and certainly we would never broach the subject of the tension between, or the integration of religion and politics.

I would imagine there’s a continuum here in our parish about how we take our religious beliefs into the political arena. Many may believe, religion is a personal matter and as our hearts are called and transformed by God to see and hold the cares of the world in our eyes as God sees them, we may make a personal choice to work at a food bank, advocate for just worker’s compensation in our place of work, or volunteer to clean up trash along the highway, as our personal response to what we see as unjust in the world.

Others may see it as a good thing that our parish, as a whole, has stated the importance of feeding the hungry and you’re delighted we as a parish community support the community meal program. Or you may see it as a right and good thing that Mo. Betsy and I and many of you here advocate for the victims of domestic violence by volunteering and promoting fundraising events, and sometimes hosting events, for Women in Need here in our church, so this organization can build a new shelter and you believe that’s what a church should do, be an advocate for the oppressed.

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<sup>2</sup> Joan Chittister

And for some of you, you may be delighted that there is a strong arm of the Episcopal Church, called the Episcopal Public Policy Network, which takes the resolutions passed at General Convention every 3 years and turns them into political action. If you are a subscriber to their news feed, you will have opportunities to sign letters or petitions to your congressmen or women, on current subjects, which you believe the gospel and the Church call us to address. As they state on their website: “Being an advocate does not always involve drastic measures. Every day, though we have the chance to stand up and speak when we see the need. Advocates have the opportunity to speak to their elected representatives, friends, family, and congregations about important issues.”<sup>3</sup> Currently there’s an opportunity to support the International Violence Against Women Act, which would make preventing and addressing violence against women and girls a top U.S. foreign policy priority. The website goes on to say, The legislation would also permanently authorize the creation of the Office of Global Women’s Issues in the State Department to support health programs and survivor services, encourage legal accountability and a change of public attitudes, promote access to economic opportunity projects and education, and address violence against women and girls in humanitarian situations.

The proponents of this bill see the intersection of their religious beliefs and public action by stating, “The Episcopal Church condemns all forms of violence against women and our baptismal covenant reminds us to respect the dignity of every human being. By supporting IVAWA, we can ensure U.S. aid and diplomacy goes toward effectively combatting gender-based violence and protecting women and girls around the world.”

Wherever you are on this continuum is fine. Whether your living out of your religious beliefs is something you feel called to do on a personal, parish or institutional church level should not be divisive. We each have different callings and specific ways in which we are to bring about God’s kingdom. If you want to talk with me about how to think this through or where you may want to come to rest on this continuum of personal or institutional response to the intersection of God’s image of the world and our political image of the world, I’m here for you. Or we can gather a group to have this conversation.

All of this is important. But if we stay here, exploring the relationship or tension between what is Caesar’s and what is God’s, I believe we’re missing the point of the gospel.

To draw the truth from text, we need to set the context. At this point in Matthew’s gospel, Jesus has ridden into Jerusalem; being claimed the king of Kings,

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<sup>3</sup> Episcopal Public Policy Network <http://www.episcopalchurch.org/page/public-policy>

Hosanna in the highest. He knows and has told his disciples he's going to die on a cross in a few days. The Pharisees, the religious elite have pulled the Herodians (the supporters of current king placed there by the Romans) into the plot devised to catch Jesus. They set it up so that if he gave a no answer to paying taxes to the emperor, he would be crucified by the Romans for sedition, or if he gave a yes answer, he would discredit himself as a prophet and lose his following. The 1<sup>st</sup> century Jews hated the roman tax for theological and economic reasons. Their theological objection was that they believed the land belonged to God and couldn't imagine what right the Romans had to collect taxes on everything from the fruits of the earth to the fish in the sea. Economically the tax amount and the corruption and bribery set within the taxation system were crushing them.

So Jesus doesn't answer the question. His response may mean:

- Since everything belongs to God, pay nothing to the emperor
- Or since the emperor has a certain domain and God has a certain domain, they need not be confused.
- Or taxes to the emperor are permitted as long as they don't infringe on the laws of God.

Whatever it means, we can be certain his statement was not an end to conversation, but a catalyst for further dialogue, one in which we are engaged with today.

My interpretation of the response of Jesus regarding paying taxes is that you can pay whatever is owed to Caesar, but you will never belong to Caesar. You belong to God. Jesus' response is careful to not make God and Caesar to be equals, for if he did, then he would be saying there is a realm in which allegiance to the emperor is appropriate, and Jesus would never say this. Quite the opposite is inferred in the text. Jesus is clear – the deep truth is that humans bear God's image and wherever they live and operate, whether it is in their social, economic, political or religious realm, they belong to God. All of us. All of the time. No exceptions.

Jesus has a claim on all our lives because God's imprint is within us and claims all parts of us. Jesus knew that there would always be tension between God and money or possessions or the worldly demands, battling out to whom we actually belong. That's why Jesus talked more about the relationship between a person and her or his possessions than any other single subject in the gospel – more than prayer, peace or evangelism. There will always be tension between God's currency of love, mercy and justice and God's claim upon our souls and the world's currency of money, power, and domination, and the claim they make upon us.

The Pharisees thought they were trapping Jesus, but they instead were trapped. Jesus asked them to show him a coin, which they had in their pockets. They had succumbed to the political system by carrying a coin they should never have had per their religious beliefs.

Jesus had nothing to lose, had he denounced Rome and the taxation system. Regardless of his answer, he was going to hang on a cross in a few days. But rather than giving us an answer, he raised up the tension we all deal with ~ how do we honor God's image within us in a world not oriented that way?

How do we honor the image of God, which has been imprinted on every aspect of our lives: our thoughts, our feelings, our relationships, our ambitions, our gifts, our talents, our money, and our responsibilities?

How do we know at depth to whom we belong? How do we know how to give back to God all that belongs to God ~ our very being?

We do it by looking at the beautiful stained glass windows behind me. The ones the light pours in each Sunday at exactly the right time and illumines your faces as you kneel to receive the grace of Christ.

We notice the three Greek letters: Alpha, Chi, and Omega. Alpha, symbolizing the beginning, Chi, meaning Christ, and Omega symbolizing the end. Jesus, our Lord and Savior: the beginning, the end, and the center ~ the center of our lives and of this parish,

When we keep our attention focused on this deepest truth, we will know that the truest and clearest image within our souls, yearning to be released into our world, is God's. We belong to God and God alone. All that we have and all that we are is God's. And it is out of gratitude for this blessing, that we can with joy return it to God. For Jesus said, "Give to God the things that are God's". That's everything, from the beginning to the end, and all the time in between. Amen.