

ST. MARK'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH, TEANECK, NEW JERSEY

OCTOBER 19, 2008

*Psalm 99, Exodus 33:12-23, 1 Thessalonians 1:1-10, Matthew 22:15-22*

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COLLECT OF THE DAY

Almighty and everlasting God, in Christ you have revealed your glory among the nations: Preserve the works of your mercy, that your Church throughout the world may persevere with steadfast faith in the confession of your Name; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. *Amen.*

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## “In God We Trust.” Really?

I can't tell you what strikes me in our gospel reading today without making a confession. I am and always have been a material girl. I don't know anyone who appreciates the things in this world more than I do, though I have some kindred spirits in this regard. One of the first things my sister ever said to my husband about me is that I'm the only person she knows who can shop all day with no money in her pocket. It's true. When I was first working after college and earning \$11,000 per year, I wasn't buying much. But I used to go to Bendel's now and then just for the spiritual lift of being around all those beautiful things.

I know that God wants us to have things we need and things that give us pleasure. But I've always been a little ashamed of my love of things because my delight in them frequently tempts me to spend my money in a way that seems disconnected from what I most value. I am constantly having to learn that I don't actually need to own all the things I admire and indeed that giving can be at least as pleasurable as acquiring. So, when I'm passing a shop window and sense yet another handbag drawing me to it, for instance, I'm always aware that buying another handbag probably isn't the best use to which I can put God's money, the money that through gifts of ability, training and opportunity I have been allowed to earn.

In our gospel reading today, representatives of two groups united only by their desire to diminish his influence confront Jesus with a question on the subject of God and money. Disciples of the Pharisees, a Jewish sect that is said to have had the backing of the common people, and the Herodians, who supported the Roman regime, approach Jesus in front of a crowd with the intention of hanging him on the horns of a false dilemma. They pose a

question to him to which he can give one of only two answers. They ask whether it is lawful to pay the Roman tax or not. Yes or no? (Has anyone ever set you up like that, with a question to which you can't respond without appearing to align yourself with a view you don't share?)

To answer that yes, it is lawful to pay the Roman tax would give Jesus the appearance of saying before questioners eager to establish a Jewish state that Caesar, not God, is sovereign. To say no, it's not lawful to pay the tax would make Jesus vulnerable to accusations of inciting rebellion.

Jesus grabs both horns of this supposed dilemma and shows that a third option exists: One can return to the emperor the coin manufactured by his mint, which bears his image and an inscription honoring him as divine, while at the same time rendering to God the things that are God's.

We might at first think that Jesus was offering too easy an answer—what's Caesar's is Caesar's, what's God's is God's, and that's that. But how does the situation look if we hand Jesus one of our coins, bearing the image of a political leader and inscribed with our national motto: "In God We Trust"? Can Jesus escape the trap as amazingly now?

In 1886, Congress passed legislation enabling the Mint to add the motto "In God We Trust" to United States coins. That motto has been in continuous use since 1909, appearing on pennies, dimes, quarters, gold coins, silver dollar coins, half-dollar coins and bills. To some, the inscription transgresses the ideal of church-state separation. But Theodore Roosevelt had other reasons for disapproving of this usage. He wrote that "to put such a motto on coins, or to use it in any kindred manner, not only does no good but does positive harm, and is in effect irreverence, which comes dangerously close to sacrilege." To Roosevelt's mind, the motto "In God We Trust" was cheapened by use on coins. Inherent in this position is a vague notion that somehow money is not quite of God.

Jesus, too, may appear to imply that the emperor's coins are not among the things of God. But what are God's things? "All things come from you and of your own do we give you," we say in the Eucharist. We echo David's prayer as he announces to the assembly that with all his resources he has given to the temple of God: "Yours, O LORD, is the greatness and the power and the glory and the majesty and the splendor, for everything in heaven and earth is yours." What are the things of God? Everything in heaven and on earth is God's. Everything. Even the denarius inscribed with Caesar's image and

motto, even our pennies, dimes and dollars. Caesar, the nations, ourselves and all our resources. Even though I may render them to Bloomingdale's, the dollars I drop on my handbag fetish are God's.

For us as Christians, there can be no separation between all that we have, including our money, and God. This, I believe, is the insight of the amazing third option Jesus offers the Pharisees and Herodians.

As Christians, we are citizens of both the kingdom of nations and the Kingdom of God. As material beings living in a material world, we have obligations and entailments in our human social structures, including our financial system. Our relationship with God transcends and also infuses our relationships in the material world just because the material world is God's.

For Christians, then, the key questions about money center on how we are using it, among our many other resources, in relationship with God who provides all that enables us to have it. Since we've been talking about stewardship at our Sunday Forum this month, it seems appropriate to ask what our congregation's relationship with money says about our relationship with God.

Some of us may be thinking about our financial commitments to St. Mark's in terms of how our giving relates to our capacity to call a rector, to pay for utilities, to improve our buildings, to carry out projects, or possibly to get something tangible in return. It's true that there is a direct relationship between the parish treasury and what happens here. And so we may be tempted to feel that we must work hard and invest here just to support the budget and the projects and the things we want to get out of giving, or to discharge an obligation to pay some imagined "fair share." Or we may find that our desire to give diminishes if we don't like something in the budget or none of the projects tugs at our heart or if we feel we're not getting what we want our giving to give us.

But in thinking about stewardship this way, starting from what we lack, are we operating from an attitude of scarcity that will eventually lead us to ask how little we can give and still have the kind of church we want and the self-respect we need? In my own case, does thinking like this mean I'm evading the spiritual question of whether I would rather trust Bloomingdale's with my money than God? How might this thinking change if we were to begin instead with joy and thanksgiving for all that we have and are by God's grace?

What if our relationship with God allowed us to imagine Paul greeting our church as he greeted the church in Thessalonica: “For we know, brothers and sisters beloved by God, that he has chosen you, because our message of the gospel came to you not in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction”? Do we know how loved we are? Do we see in ourselves the love of God, in whom the faith of a few moms teaching Sunday school in a house eighty years ago brought into existence a church that has become a beacon of inclusive love for the whole community?

I’m often in touch with Marion Phipps, one of the Seabury seminarians who were with us as part of their congregational immersion course last year. Last January, the seminarians involved themselves in every aspect of our parish life. And in every activity in which they participated, Marion tells me, they were overwhelmed by the abundance of faith, hope, love, gifts, skills and generosity they observed in us. In hearing the history of this parish, what our visitors noticed more than anything else was that God continues to be present and to provide at St. Mark’s. Yet, how many of us tell the story of our congregation this way? Have we seen and rejoiced in the ways God is providing here now through us?

Our visitors saw us as people who have every reason to rejoice as David did: “But who am I, and who are my people, that we should be able to give as generously as this?” Can we see ourselves that way too? Do we really trust in God who has chosen us?

May it be so.

*Amen.*