

29th Sunday OT A

My Dear Brothers and Sisters,

I want you to think about a few things and then I want to ask you some questions about those things. First, think about the checks you have written, the bills you have paid, and the purchases you have charged over the last few weeks. How have you spent your money? Next, think about where you have been, what you have done, and who you have been with over the last few weeks. How have you spent your time? Finally, what are the most important values in your life? What are the values that you say guide your life, that give you meaning and purpose?

God is somewhere in the midst of those three things. So are your emperors. The answers you gave to my questions reveal their presence and your relationship with them. I know that to be true in my own life. I have seen it in the lives of others. I have heard it in the stories of others.

I have no judgments about whatever your answers might be, and I am not suggesting some answers are either right or wrong. I wonder, though, does your spending of time and money reflect your values? In what ways are your values being made tangible and visible? How are you spending your capital? And by capital, I mean more than time and money. I am talking about all that you are all that you have, and the entirety of your life. Are you living the life you say you want to live? Is

your life one of authenticity and integrity? Is there coherence and wholeness to your life?

I think that's what Jesus is getting at in today's gospel when he says, **"Then repay to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God."**

It sounds simple enough. It sounds like we should be able to just take a piece of paper, divide it into two columns, one for God and one for our emperors, and start making our list. That's often how this text gets interpreted and applied. We hear Jesus saying there is God's stuff and that there is the emperor's stuff. Then we try to split our life and world between church and state, religion, and politics, sacred and secular, tithes and taxes, spirit and matter, heaven and earth, humanity, and divinity as if they are completely separate and unrelated, as if they are in opposition and have nothing to do with each other.

That split or duality is at the heart of the question the Pharisees and Herodians ask Jesus. The Pharisees, as you know, were the religious leaders and authorities. The Herodians are significant because their loyalty to King Herod suggests they willingly cooperate with the Roman occupiers of the Jews while the Pharisees distanced themselves from Rome.

The only thing that brings the two together is their shared dislike of Jesus. They come to Jesus with a question. **"Is it lawful to pay the census tax to Caesar or not?"** They want to know whose side Jesus is

on, the emperor's or God's. It is a trap, a setup. Either/or questions and situations almost always are. Whichever way Jesus answers the question he will have incriminated himself with either the Pharisees or Rome. That's dualistic thinking.

So how does Jesus answer their question? Is it the empire or God? Yes, yes, it is. That's his answer. They never expected that answer. They set a trap for Jesus, and they were the ones caught.

To the degree we live with either/or, dualistic, thinking we only entrap ourselves. We too often fragment and classify our lives. So, we have our prayer life, our religious life, our family life, our political life, our love life, our work life, our economic life. We talk and live as if there is no integrity or coherence between them. When we do we end up excluding God from a large part of our lives and our world. We perpetuate the Pharisaic-Herodian plot to entrap Jesus and we rightfully deserve to be called hypocrites.

I cannot help but wonder if that's, at least in part, why much of today's culture distrusts the church and finds it to be irrelevant. The church has lost its voice and has no credibility. It has nothing to offer. Simplistic answers are no match for the complexities of life. The last thing we need is more fragmentation and division in our lives. That's not who we are to be or how we are to live. It is certainly not who Jesus is or how he lived, this one who is both fully human and fully divine.

I don't think Jesus is separating our lives or our world. He is not asking us to divide our loyalties or classify our lives. Instead, he is holding before us the reality of God and the reality of our emperors. Both are real. Both are a part of our lives and our world. Jesus is asking us to step into and live in the tension of those two realities. That's what he did. That's where he lived. To stand in that place is to stand with Jesus. That's where life gets real. That's where life is really lived. It is neither a comfortable nor an easy place to be. There are no easy answers. Here is what I mean.

Begin with your checkbook, calendar, and values. What would go in God's column? What would go in the emperor's column? What criteria determine whether something is God's or the emperor's? Are God and the emperor mutually exclusive, always in opposition? Can they be complementary? Is the emperor always bad? Must we choose one over the other? Who is God in our life? Who are our emperors?

I don't have answers to those questions. Instead, I struggle with them just like most of you do. I want so much to have a clear-cut answer. I want to be able to give you an answer. But I don't have any answers. I cannot tell you what to do but I can stand with you in the tension of God and the emperor and you can stand with me. That struggle, the tension of living with and between God and my emperors, continually pushes me inward, to examine my life, to reflect on who I am, what I do, and whose image and title I bear.

I wonder if that's Jesus' intention in today's gospel. I wonder if that's why the Pharisees and the Herodians were amazed. His answer to them creates an impossible-to-solve problem and maybe that's the point. Maybe when we recognize, accept, and struggle with this impossible-to-solve problem, that's when we begin to follow Jesus. We stop searching for answers and begin seeking life. That's when and where the church has something to say, faith makes a difference, and lives are changed.

If we are not struggling and wrestling, we may not really be praying. To avoid or stand outside the struggle is, in some way, to stand outside our own lives. It avoids the reality of our lives and the presence of Christ who lives in that reality.

My Dear Brothers and Sisters,

To simply divide life between the empire and God is too simplistic, too easy. It avoids the struggle. It is an oversimplification of Jesus' life, your life and my life, the beauty of God, and the holiness of creation.

“Then repay to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God.” Amen.