

**18 Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 24 – Year A – October 16, 2011**  
**Exodus 33:12-23; Psalm 99; 1 Thessalonians 1:1-10; Matthew 22:15-22**  
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Our society loves labels of all kinds. How many of us check out the label on packaged food products before we buy them? Many of us are watching our weight, avoiding allergens, or trying to reduce the salt in our diet. Some of us just like to know where our fresh food is grown or imported from, and so on. For clothes, we may well prefer a certain designer label, or a brand that we know fits us well. With greater social awareness of injustices around the world, many of us also look at labels so we can shop wisely for fair trade products, or avoid buying from countries with unfair or abusive labor practices. Then there are other labels such as nicknames, or descriptive categories that we all use to place people, often into socio-economic divisions. Sadly, there are also more cruel labels that children of all ages use to dehumanize, taunt, or exclude others.

Today's passage from Matthew's Gospel describes a delegation of Pharisees and Herodians going to see Jesus with malice aforethought. Their plot and purpose is to entrap Him with a no-win question, "Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?" If Jesus answers "yes", then He's guilty of blasphemy, and idolatry under Jewish Law. If He answers "no", then He's guilty of sedition. None of those labels would be good news for Jesus. Either answer would give the Judean leaders the excuse they're looking for to bring Jesus to trial lawfully. However, there's no way Jesus will give the authorities cause to indict Him. He will go to the cross on trumped up charges, an innocent man. Jesus also denies the delegation a straightforward 'yes' or 'no', then promptly names what is truly in their hearts for all to hear. He then asks for the Roman coin that had to be used to pay the poll tax in question.

The denarius they provide likely had a picture of Tiberius' head and the inscription, "Tiberius Caesar, august and divine son of Augustus, high priest." For the Judeans and followers of Jesus alike, the coin and its inscription are offensive. The denarius is a harsh reminder of unwelcome political, economic, and even religious oppression under Roman rule. For the majority of poor peasant farmers the tax represents a significant hardship. Every man age fourteen, and every woman age twelve, to sixty-five had to pay the tax, and therefore are annually indebted to Rome. The inscription declares Tiberius as a god, and the high priest of the people. First century Rome can hardly be described as the epitome of divine providential care and goodness, and it seems that the Judean leaders are taking strong cues from their Roman counterparts. Traditionally, the role of the High Priest is to lead the people in spiritual matters, and to care for the people in community. Obviously, neither Rome nor the Judean leaders come close to fulfilling either of those important responsibilities on behalf of the people. Jesus already has a good label for them, "you hypocrites," He says. What follows once again reveals a great deal about the delegation sent to trap Jesus, and something about us as well.

Jesus says, "Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's." Jesus' answer precludes political maneuvering and has an almost disinterested air to it concerning the issue of paying taxes to Rome or to any other governing authority. When it comes to respecting governing authorities and paying taxes, Paul expands on today's Gospel lesson. This is what he says in Romans 13:1, 6-7, "Let every person be subject to the governing authorities; for there is no authority except from God, and those authorities that exist have been instituted by God.... For the same reason you also pay taxes, for the authorities are God's servants.... Pay to all what is due them – taxes to whom taxes are due, revenue to whom revenue is due, respect to whom respect is due, honor to whom honor is due." All worldly authority is under God's authority. That takes care of paying our taxes, but we still need to talk more about money.

As culturally indoctrinated as we are, it's not hard for us to figure out, as the song goes, that "money makes the world go round". Who can forget the famous "show me the money" scene from the movie *Jerry Maguire*? Even if you never saw the movie, I bet you've heard the quote. Earlier in Matthew's Gospel,

Jesus shares His thoughts on our relationship with money, saying, “No one can serve two masters; .... You cannot serve God and wealth” (Matthew 6:24) He then goes on to say, “Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear.... But if God so clothes the grass of the field, ...will he not much more clothe you – you of little faith?” (Matthew 6:30). While we all know how useful money is in daily commerce, Jesus tells us plainly that money cannot supersede our relationship with God. We have to look honestly and humbly at our own relationship with money. Jesus also stresses, if you’ll pardon the pun, that when we put God first in our lives, everything falls into a right perspective. By God’s grace, we start to discover that we **do** have enough of everything we really need. We begin to realize that if we’re living in a state of anxiety most of the time, we may have lost our focus on God, in whom rests our faith and trust. Perhaps Jesus is also reminding us that we have a limited time on this earth, and through the discipline of prayer, we might well discern better ways to spend our time than in worrying.

As we should expect, Jesus indirectly poses a much more interesting question for deeper reflection. His response refocuses the conversation to the divine, whilst deftly hitting the curve ball pitched to Him, right out of the ballpark. Still we are left with the burning issue of giving to God the things that are God’s. In that respect, we have to understand what *is* God’s, and from there develop a much greater awareness and appreciation for our stewardship of God’s good gifts. I use the word stewardship, because we truly don’t own anything in this world. We’re merely stewards of all God’s resources, and the blessed recipients of God’s gracious love. You’ve heard me say it before, and I’m sure you’ll hear me say it again – *it all belongs to God*. The Psalmist puts it like this, “The earth is the Lord’s and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it” (Psalm 24:1). There are no exclusions to God’s right of ownership and authority over the whole world and everyone in it, whether we accept God’s love or not.

If we wanted to find our Creator’s label, where would we look, and what do you think it would read? Beloved of God? Made in God’s image? God’s own? In God’s gracious economy, we bear God’s image imprinted indelibly on our souls. Our flesh, blood and bone, are covered in the fingerprints of God. This is what God says through the prophet Isaiah (49:15-16), “I will not forget you. See, I have inscribed you on the palms of my hands”. The intimacy of God’s love in relationship with us is inspiring. We bear God’s image in our being, and in turn, we are engraved into the palms of His hands. The spiritual challenge Jesus poses is to be as diligent about God’s things as we are with respect to our worldly obligations, like paying our taxes. We are a part of this world, even though we hold a dual citizenship in the kingdom of God. As such, we are also sanctified or set apart from the world, to build up the Body of Christ, broaden the kingdom of God, and serve God and our neighbors. God trusts each of us to use His resources rightly. The only obligation here is faithfulness, including prayerful discernment of God’s will for our lives. We are all invited to consider our decisions in light of the confession that we are God’s beloved children, and that everything already belongs to God.

Our *faith* in the Lord liberates us to be counter-cultural, so that we can say ‘no’ to rampant consumerism, and greedy acquisition. Our *trust* in the Lord empowers us to give with confidence. We can and do say ‘yes’ to God by faithfully sharing our whole self, and all the blessings of our lives. To give of all that we have in our care and ourselves is to give to God the things that are God’s. Finally, I have a label for each of us today. It’s an opportunity to call one another by name, just as God knows each of us by name. It’s also an opportunity to proclaim the only label God desires for us, now and for eternity.

Amen.