

In God We Trust
 Matthew 22: 15-22
 November 16, 2008
 First Federated Church
 Peoria, Illinois
 The Rev. Dr. Forrest.Krummel
Sermon Notes

I

The Pharisees had their sights on Jesus. He taught with one who had authority. He asked too many questions.

His parables threatened the status quo, way things had always been done. Bottom line, the Pharisees felt threatened.

Something had to be done, so they sent their disciples to Jesus with a question.

“Teacher, we know you have integrity, teach the way of God accurately, are indifferent to popular opinion, and don’t pander. So tell us honestly: Is it right to pay taxes to Caesar or not?”

A well laid trap.

Taxes have always been a touchy subject.

This particular tax, though, was particularly awkward.

It could only be paid with a Roman coin.

On one side of the coin was an image of Caesar.

On the other side was the inscription:

“Tiberius Caesar, august son of the divine Augustus, high priest” violated the prohibition of worshipping any god other than the LORD.”

Zealots resented the tax more than others because they despised Roman occupation.

But observant Jews, like Jesus and the Pharisees, would have had moral difficulties with it too.

The coin reminded the Jews not only of Roman rule but it violated the command not to have graven images or to bow before any god other than the LORD.

To be in possession of the coin compromised one’s spiritual integrity.

So as the Pharisees saw it, if Jesus said that it was okay to pay the tax, he would alienate his follower.

On the other hand, if he said that it was *not* permissible to pay the tax, he would run afoul of Rome itself.

It seemed to be a no-win situation.

Jesus saw their question for what it was—a trap.

“Show me one of the coins,” he replied to the Pharisees’ disciples.

One of them pulled out a coin and handed it to him and in so doing, perhaps hearing at that moment the snap of the first hammer of their own trap fall upon him.

Jesus exposed them as being disingenuous for *they* possessed one of the forbidden coins! Perhaps playing innocent, or maybe driving home the point, Jesus asked, “Whose image is that on the coin?”

“Caesar’s,” they replied.

Handing the coin back to the Pharisee’s disciple who gave it to him, he said,

“Then give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar but give to God what belongs to God.”

The second hammer fell.
 Jesus had sprung the trap and walked away with the cheese.
 The Pharisees disciples walked away embarrassed and empty handed.
 In this exchange Jesus gave both Caesar and God their due.
 It is right to pay taxes.
 It is a responsibility of citizenship.
 It is the rent that we pay to live in this great land.
 God, though, demands a greater loyalty.
 Caesar comes and goes, God's Kingdom is here, now and eternal.
 A little later, in John's gospel, when Jesus stood before Pilate and Pilate demanded, "Will you not speak to me?!...Do you not know that I have the power to release you or to crucify you?!"
 Jesus replied very simply, "You have no power over me except that which has been given to you by God." (John 19: 10b, 11)

II

Jesus was aware of the power of money.
 He knew not that poverty destroys the human spirit.
 Conversely, he also knew that relative affluence often leads to a spirit-destroying sense of *false* security.
 Other than popular myth, there is little to suggest that Jesus was poor.
 He was a skilled tradesman, a rarity in that day.
 He saw money and possessions for what they are; neither good or bad in and of themselves.
 They are generically neutral.
 They can be used to build or to destroy, to enhance or to diminish.
 Knowing this, he was not intimidated by it.
 That is why he spent so much time talking about money and possessions.
 As a matter of fact, he spent more time talking about those two subjects than he did on anything else other than the Kingdom of God.
 He talked about it far more than he did about sexuality or even prayer.
 To Jesus, the human challenge, the disciple's challenge, is to balance wealth with service to God.
 In other words, our main job is to work for the advancement of the Kingdom of God on earth.
 While we have to give Caesar his due, we also have a great deal of freedom on how we use the vast majority of our assets.
 Sam Lloyd, the Dean of the National Cathedral in Washington, D.C. once noted that we "live in a consumer society."
 "(Therefore) We need help in learning how to be generous."
 Isn't one of the first things that we try to teach our child is the concept of sharing?
 In an interview, author Anne Lamott noted that it is good to learn how be generous.
 She wrote: "Giving is the way we can feel abundant. Giving is the way we fill ourselves up."
 Several months ago I was visiting with a long time member of First Federated Church.
 On many of my pastoral visits I like to ask those who have been around First Federated

Church for a long time which pastor they were most fond of and why. On this particular visit the parishioner he replied to my question, “Reverend Stubbs.”

“We were about the same age,” he told me.

“We built the Christian Education wing of the church.”

And then, after a pause he continued, “You know every year he would give the same stewardship sermon.

He would tell us, “You don’t have to give until it hurts, but you should give until you feel it!”

A few weeks ago Lynn Banta talked about the biblical notion of a tithe; setting aside 10% of our income for the work of God’s Kingdom.

A week later David Bailey talked to you about the three reasons why people give to churches and to non-profits.

They are:

1. *A belief in the mission*
2. *A trust in the organization’s leadership, and*
3. *The perception of fiscal responsibility.*

He went on to say:

“As a church and congregation, we help save and change lives.

We help those in need and those of all ages to grow in their Christian faith.”

Our mission—our purpose—is to make disciples and glorify God.

One of the first images that comes to the minds of many when they hear the name “First Federated Church” is our beautiful facility.

It is well-maintained but it is also a sacred space in the midst of Peoria’s sprawl.

The columbarium attracts visitors who admire the garden.

Our facility inspires a sense of awe.

It wasn’t too long ago that a non-member stopped me on a staircase leading to the second floor and said,

“I can feel the presence of God whenever I am in this place.”

Our building is an asset to be maintained but the bricks and mortar come alive because of what happens inside and outside of our walls.

After all, there are many beautiful and empty cathedrals throughout the world, especially in Europe.

The soul of First Federated Church is the Risen Lord, but the heart is its people and what they do in the name of Christ.

Through our worship we feed the spiritually hungry,

Through our fellowship we move people from isolation to community,

Through our Christian Education we change the hearts and minds of children and adults,

Through our mission support we fulfill Christ’s command

to feed the hungry,

give drink to the thirsty,

welcome the stranger,

clothe the naked,

treat the sick

and care for the forgotten.

III

On every American coin there is an inscription. It reads simply,
“In God we trust.”

That is a faith statement that you carry around in your pocket or purse every day.

As I think about it, it strikes me that trusting in God is not exemplified by what wear on our lapels, or hang around our necks.

It is exemplified by what we do.

And what we do is not born by what is stamped on our money, but by what has been stamped on our hearts.

In God we trust.

Really? Amen.