

Sermon: God's Divine Inscription  
20 Pentecost, Year A  
Matthew 22:15-22

Shelby Ochs Owen  
Emmanuel Church, Staunton  
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Yogi Berra, the famous baseball player, coach and manager gave the world a great gift in his quirky statements that catch us off guard. Some of the best include:

1. When you come to a fork in the road, take it.
2. No one goes there nowadays, it's too crowded.
3. Baseball is 90% mental and the other half is physical.
4. It was impossible to get a conversation going, everybody was talking too much.
5. You better cut the pizza in four pieces because I'm not hungry enough to eat six.

Well, Jesus catches the Pharisees and Herodians off guard in today's passage from Matthew. Jesus is being framed. The Pharisees are challenging him because they are feeling increasingly uncomfortable with his popularity and more and more deeply threatened by his message. His words disturb their own power hold as leaders of the Jewish people. His words and actions of inclusivity, of love and justice, disturb the status quo. They want him out of the way and if they can just trap him into saying that people shouldn't pay their taxes to Rome, then Roman authorities can seize him for sedition. And if they can catch him saying they should pay their taxes he could be accused of setting aside the law of God.

So in the same creepy way as the serpent spoke to Eve in the Garden of Eden, they flatter Jesus, and attempt to make him stumble, "Teacher, we know that you are sincere, and teach the way of God in accordance with truth, and show deference to no one; for you do not regard people with partiality." This all sounds pretty good and strangely true so far, and then they pounce. "Tell us then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?" Jesus knows they are trying to get him to falter so that he is out of their way and they are back in power. And he answers, "Show me the coin used for the tax." They show him a denarius. "Whose head is this and whose title?" "The emperor's", they say. And Jesus replies, "Give, therefore, to the emperor the things that are the emperor's and to God the things that are God's." They could say nothing to this. They know that Jesus has outwitted them all and has left them speechless. For they know that to give (or to "render" in the KJV) to God means to give to God whatever bears the divine image. And that is themselves! This means human beings, of course, as we are made in the image of God. So what could the Pharisees do but to hightail it out of there?

While Yogi Berra's statements make questionable sense, Jesus' statements make *divine* sense and point to a deeper truth than many of us, including the Pharisees, are ready to accept. Jesus is saying essentially that *all* things are God's. Yes, go ahead and pay your taxes knowing that the bigger and deeper truth is that all things come from God. In fact nothing really *belongs* to us at all. God's divine inscription is written all over each and every one of us.

The end of October marks the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Reformation. Specifically it marks the day that Martin Luther, a Roman Catholic, nailed his 95 Theses on the church door at Wittenburg, Germany. This document listed the things that irked Luther most about the church

that he belonged to. He believed the church needed reforming and his contributions profoundly changed the direction of western Christianity civilization.

One statement Martin Luther made, apart from the theses, is pertinent to our season of stewardship. He said that growing in faith requires three conversions: conversion of the head, conversion of the heart and conversion of the purse. Conversion means to change. For some of us we may have been converted to a Christian faith over night. Great! It rarely happens that way. I would say that conversion as a Christian is a process that occurs over a lifetime. Jesus' words from our text today call for the conversion Luther was referring to. "Give to God what is God's."

The biblical tithe is to give 10% of our earnings. At some points in biblical history this meant grain or produce, and at other times it meant cattle or sheep, and at other times it meant currency – whatever one's earnings. Giving "first fruits" means one gives to God the *first* and best 10% and not just what is left over. The tithe is a gift to us in that it gives us a concrete way to remember that all that we have comes from God. Tithing can include giving to the church and any other charitable organizations or individuals who are in need. If it is something we feel we cannot do immediately we can move toward it by giving sacrificially, even if not yet 10%.

I remember when my husband Steve and I began giving what was to us at least, sacrificially. Oddly, it was when our children were very small, perhaps a time when some might have suggested we needed to keep more of what we had. But we began to give and to increase our giving over the years to the point of tithing, our current practice. I have never regretted it (If you asked Steve, he might have a different story!) and in fact it is a practice I actually enjoy. And strangely it is a practice that brings us freedom and a new energy in our growing faith.

As each of us grows in faith we begin to realize that all aspects of our lives as children of God, including our minds, our hearts, our wallets, need to be converted and integrated. How generous we are with our money is often tied to how generous we are with our hearts and minds, and how freely we give of ourselves is reflective of our growing faith in God. It is tempting to keep some aspects of our lives separated out from our faith in God. There is often a gap between what we say we believe about Jesus and about God and our behavior. But Jesus' words point to the idea that in order to think with truth and the right perspective about money, we must recognize it as a gift from God.

If you and I are made in the image of God, if we bear the divine inscription, how can we hold back the gifts God has given each of us, our minds, our hearts, even our money?  
Amen.