Albany Presbyterian Church

October 18th 2026 Matthew 22:15-22 Render to God what belongs to him.

Last week, we reflected on one of Jesus' parables about the wedding banquet, in which Jesus says many are invited, but only a few are chosen. We have also reflected on the ancient literature of St. Augustine, "the City of God," which says that we live in the two spiritual cities- the city of God rooted in the love of God, in humility and self-giving, and in having our hope in the kingdom of God, walking in the ways of God, showing compassion to others. and the city of man- where the two cities intermingle and intersect with one another- until the Kingdom of God comes and the city of God triumphs over the city of man, rooted in the love of self, driven by pride, lust for earthly power, and temporal pleasure and dominion, whereas the city of God.

And that God is present in all. God is at work in both cities to bring his salvation, and therefore God rules sovereign over all. For example, Isaiah says God raised up Cyrus, the great Persian king, around 559 BC (as we read in Isaiah 45:1-7). Though he had no idea who God is or how God works, Isaiah says God raised him up; Cyrus was to be the chosen one, the deliverer, the anointed, who would set his people free from the exile in Babylon, and bring his people home to Judah. And that God is sovereign in all.

In Matthew, the Pharisees and religious authorities confront Jesus because they are gathering evidence to accuse and arrest him so they can bring him to trial.

In verse 16, Matthew said, "The Pharisees went out and sent their disciples along with the Herodians to Jesus."

As we know, Herodians were like a political party: supporters of the Herodian kings and the loyalists to Caesar the emperor. Normally, the Pharisees and Herodians were fierce rivals; maybe that is why the Pharisees sent their students instead of coming themselves, since they usually didn't like being seen together.

Jesus was a threat. The Pharisees were threatened by Jesus for undermining their religious authority and their interpretation and practice of the law. The Herodians feared Jesus as a political revolutionary who would upset the Romans and destroy the peace and power they enjoyed by being close supporters of the Roman Empire.

So they united in their intent to trap Jesus, beginning with flattery, calling him a sincere teacher who teaches the way of God in accordance with truth, and so on, all to ask a question to trick him. And the question was, "Is it right to pay the imperial taxes to Caesar, the emperor?"

The plan was... if he answered that the taxes were lawful, he would offend the Pharisees and many others who disliked the empire's constant meddling in their lives and the heavy burden they placed on many. If Jesus spoke out against the tax, it wouldn't take long for the Herodians to take this seditious talk to the Roman authorities.

But Jesus, seeing their intent, confronted them about their evil intent, yet he still responded. He said, "Show me what you got"

And they brought a silver coin, worth a denarius, a laborer's day's wage. At the time of Jesus, the Roman emperor was Tiberius Caesar, and he liked to put his mark on things, like shrines, museums, and money. A new coin made around that time sparked a controversy: for it bore the portrait and titles of Emperor Tiberius Caesar, with the inscription saying he is the son of God; on the reverse, the emperor's mother sits on a throne, with an inscription declaring her the High Priest. This became a political and spiritual issue, because the coin they had to use was very idolatrous. This was a great offence to the Jews.

But Jesus asked whose image was inscribed on this coin. "The emperors," they answered. He then says, "Give therefore to the emperor the things that belong to the emperor, and render to God the things that belong to God."

This might have satisfied what the Herodians wanted to hear, because Jesus essentially says they should pay tax to the emperor, and it satisfied the Pharisees because Jesus says to give God what belongs to God, and that everything belongs to God.

But, by asking to see the coin used for tax, Jesus may have exposed the Pharisees' hypocrisy: they already participated in the economy of the day, kept the coin in their pockets, had money changers in the temple, and people had to pay for the temple tax with that money, and they all had to pay taxes to Rome themselves.

But Jesus has already spoken about money and divided loyalty: in Matthew 6:24, no one can serve two masters, for you will either hate one and love the other or be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth at the same time. Jesus said. So, by pointing out that the coin used to pay taxes to the emperor, whose image and inscription are idolatrous, he might also be cautioning them to be clear about where their loyalty lies.

If we imagine ourselves in the story, think about you on that day, when Jesus was confronted with the question of human loyalty and the coin bearing the image of the earthly emperor, maybe Jesus flipped that coin in his hand a few times and then tossing it casually aside, and then his eyes rising to meet those who were there waiting for his answer, confronting each of them with an unspoken question hanging in the air... And you, my friend, whose image do you bear?

I went to a church gathering in North Shore a few nights ago, where we heard stories from people who work with homeless people in Auckland. People from Different agencies, like Orange Sky, Massey Community Housing Trust, Bay Area Housing Trust, EQUIP, the Salvation Army, and Vision West, all spoke about their work, their vision, and how they help those in desperate need of shelter. I was pleasantly surprised that almost all of these non-profit organisations that help people in need started in churches, with the vision of those who knew exactly whose image they bear; they were rendering to God what belongs to God.

And I think of our ministry with "tea for the soul," and also yesterday, with so many of us doing the work we did, not for ourselves but for the church; maybe that is part of our lives, rendering to God what belongs to God.

Not many of us think about the coins we carry, what is on them, the inscriptions, what they represent, what they say about us and our lives, their meaning, and their demands. If our spiritual currency is our lives, inscribed with God's image, how do we show that? How do we render to God what belongs to God?

A Poem on Bearing the Image of God

Carried from dust, in the quiet design,
Stamped with a whisper of light most divine,
Not as cold stone where a tyrant is set,
Not as a shadow the ages forget—
But flesh that can listen, and hands that can heal,
A mirror where mercy and justice are real.

We carry the likeness of One who is love,
To steward the green and to look to above,
To speak out for grace in the thick of the fray,
And light up the corners of ordinary day.
Though cracked by our pride and the weight of the fall,
The imprint remains on the heart of us all,
A summons to rise, and in meekness, display
The King who first breathed us to life in the clay.