



CHRIST CHURCH CRANBROOK

“Amazing Taxes” The Twentieth Sunday After Pentecost

When they heard this, they were amazed. Grace to you and peace from God, our Father and the Lord, our Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

I woke up super excited today, as I'm sure you did too. You can feel it in the crisp autumn air. The leaves are turning beautiful, vibrant colors. We've got those wonderful flaming reds, those warm oranges, those golden yellows and these beautiful leaves cascade to the ground. And there's just that kind of feeling in the days, they're becoming shorter. And we're beginning to talk about what we're going to do for Halloween or what we're not going to do for Halloween. And we're talking about all these things and that can only mean one thing - it's October. And in the church, it has to be the most exciting time of the year. Dare I say, even more exciting than Christmas and Easter combined.

It is the beginning of stewardship season! Stewardship season, right? It's an exciting time of year where we get to think of our church that we depend on to bring us hope through the proclamation of the Word of God and through the giving of the beautiful sacraments. And then we anticipate the amount of money we're hoping to receive in 2021. And then we determine how much we want to give to the work of the church. It just sends shivers of thrill down your spine, doesn't it? It's almost as exciting as paying taxes.

Give the things of Caesar to Caesar and give the things of God to God. Between taxes and tithing, I'm not sure what's left for us. For a short period of time in my twenties I was a tax preparer. I had a job at one of those big firms that rhymes with sock. And as a tax preparer, I learned that there were seasons for taxes also. So there was the season for the procrastinators, the ones who came in on April 13th, 14th, and 15th. And it was all tax preparers' hands and calculators on deck.

And before that, there was the March season. And that was when folks came in, armed with receipts and lots of complicated 1099, and they had gave up trying to figure it out themselves and realized that their returns were a little bit more complicated and they need help. But by far the busiest season at this little shop was at the end of January because that's when people receive their W2s. And poor folk would come in, they qualified for earned income credit, which let them receive often the biggest check that they would receive during the year. And that check came from the Federal Government.

Back then if you earned \$22,000 or less and had some children, you would receive a check for up to \$2,000. And I remember processing this woman's return. She had brought her W2 and her kids into the shop and it was all she had, she had nothing else. And so the crunching of the numbers was really simple. And I was really happy to deliver the good news. You're going to get \$2,000 and she corrected me. She said, no, I'm getting \$1,800, 200 of it belongs to God. And she said that with a twinkle in her eye. And I wasn't sure if she was excited about the big refund or excited about the big gift she got to give to God.

"Is it lawful to pay taxes?" asked the Pharisees and the Herodians. I learned that these two groups are like Democrats and Republicans. They agree on little. Pharisees were against paying taxes to the emperors in a way to resist the Roman Empires. And Herodians thought it was important for Jews to figure out how to work with a foreign government. They both agreed on one thing. They disagreed with Jesus's way. So they joined forces in an effort to discredit him. Deciding to throw him a question that would trip up anybody who is being held hostage in their own country or being occupied by an oligarchy. Is it lawful to pay taxes to that emperor?

Taxes back then, they were hated as much as they are today. And back then, there was actually some good reason - they taxed everything. Everything. They taxed people. They taxed cattle, they taxed oil, they taxed fish, they taxed beer. If you were Jewish, you had to pay a special tax. It was called *fiscus Judiacus*. Can you imagine if we had to pay a tax for being Episcopalian? *Fiscus Episcopali*. It was a heavy burden on people. Made even worse because the local tax collectors had a system with the Roman Empire. It was said that they would promise the Roman Empire a certain amount of money, and then they would deliver that money, and then they could go back and take as much as they want from the people who owed to taxes, extorting them. And taxes was a constant reminder that the emperor was in charge of your life.

Who could blame those Pharisees and Herodians for asking, is this lawful? Is this what God wants the people to go through? Is this what God was expecting from us as we struggle with a system that's not working for us? So the Pharisees and the Herodians asked Jesus this question to prove He doesn't have any answers. He can't offer them the help that they need. He can't solve these massive problems for them. They have to continue to fight the good fight to be free of the Roman Empire, and Jesus is not going to offer any solutions.

But Jesus decides to answer their question with a party trick. He asks someone to pull out a coin. And biblical scholars, oh, they wax eloquently about this passage and about the coin, about the image on the coin and the image on the people and how we're all made in the image of God and how the coin represents idolatry and other scholars want to point out how Jesus neither denies and or confirms the paying of taxes with His snappy comeback. Render

unto Caesar what is Caesar's and render under God what is God's. And this young, brilliant soul told me for her it was the birth of the separation of church and state. And when I brought it up to my 16-year-old son, he said, render unto Little Caesars what is Little Caesars! And we all got a hankering for pizza.

You can have fun interpreting what this one sentence means to you. But here's what struck me. After Jesus gives His response, the Pharisees and the Herodians, they weren't irritated by what he said. They weren't annoyed by what came out of his mouth. They weren't even angry that he foiled their attempts to trap Him. They were amazed. And there are other times in the gospel when people are amazed by Jesus. Like the time that the Disciples are in a boat and the storms are raging around them and they're afraid that their boat is going to capsize and they're all going to be killed. And Jesus calms the winds and the waves. And they say, what kind of man is this that the wind listens to Him?

Or how about when He goes and there's two men, one who is mute, and one who is mute and blind who are just possessed by demons as the scripture says, and He heals them. And the crowds are amazed because who can do that? Or there's that weird story where there's a fig tree and it doesn't seem to be yielding any fruit. And so there right on the spot Jesus withers the fig tree and it goes from life to death. And the Disciples say to one another, how can He do that?

When we witness the divine in action, there's really only one way humans can respond. This was the divine. Jesus was the divine come down to change things that go way beyond human action. God was not going to tackle the problems that face the people with just regular human means, but God was going to liberate everyone through the life and death and resurrection of Jesus, that kind of response to the trouble that we face can only be accomplished by God.

And that is why I think Jesus said some things belong in the realm of Caesar and the world, but some things can only be solved by God. I am the Lord who does these things, He says in the book of Isaiah. Sometimes we humans can fix the problems we have, but sometimes we need God to save us. I don't know about you, but I need God to know that I think we have a mess down here right now. And we all need God to know that as much as we can work for vaccines and herd immunity, and we can work on politics and our economy, we need real intervention. We need more than what humans can do or provide. We need God to act.

And that brings me back to stewardship season. Because I was thinking how much I need God to do something. In these last short seven months, we have increased the number of people in poverty in the US alone by 8 million. We're going to have another funeral in a couple of weeks for someone who just died of COVID-19 yesterday. We don't know what school is going to look like in November. And now we're being told that we need to think twice about big

gatherings during Thanksgiving, we have gigantic problems. And I have now told God in no uncertain terms that I know and trust that God will save us from all of this, just as He promised us through Christ.

So for me this year, my pledge is personal. And as I think about my pledge for this upcoming year, I realized that it means a little bit more to me than giving to a church that I know and I adore and I love. This pledge is my way of saying to God, I know you are going to amaze me. I don't need to test you. I trust you. And here's my tangible way of showing you that, Lord. And Troy and I have increased our pledge for 2021.

I'm telling you, God is going to amaze us. Can you trust God? And if you do, what is your way of showing that you trust God? Will you calm your heart as you experience uncertainty? Will you act with boldness and plan for a future of hope? Will you be able to turn to God and say with conviction, "I trust you will provide for us, and so I will not be afraid"? Whatever you do, know that even when you struggle with belief, it is not going to stop Jesus Christ from acting. And so generations later, when they talk about this pandemic, it will be said of us, and they were amazed.

Amen.

[End of Recording]