

Sermon
March 24, 2019

Covenant Presbyterian Church
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The Trap
Matthew 22:15-22

When our children were teenagers I remember Bill and I having several long conversations about how using trap questions with our children was not a good thing to do. You know the questions you ask when you know the answer or you want to catch someone in a lie or make them squirm. For trap questions set children up to lie on top of what they have already done.

I remember one time in particular when I got in my car in the morning to go to work. As I closed the door on the driver's side I noticed that the window was down. I thought - did I leave the window down last night? I don't even remember rolling it down.... Then I turned the key in the ignition and the radio was blaring with rock music! Pretty clear someone had been in my car!!! And I had a pretty good idea who that had been - our 14 or 15 year old son Bart. My inclination was to go in the house and to try to trap him to see if he would admit it. But I realized to ask - were you driving my car was a trap because I already knew the answer. A more appropriate question was why did you drive my car last night? I didn't need to trap him because he was already caught! Know what he said? I just took it around the circle, Mom. I didn't leave the neighborhood! Like that made it ok!!! Thank God we survived that stage!

Our scripture today says a trap was being set. For several weeks now we have heard the Pharisees ask Jesus or his disciples questions. Why do you eat with tax collectors and sinners? Why do your disciples not follow the laws about harvesting on the Sabbath? Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders and not wash their hands? Who gave you the authority to teach like you do? With each question the stakes have been raised but so far Jesus' answers have not provided them with what they needed. They needed a question where he would be guilty no matter what he answered and they had an idea.

Note the Pharisees set this up but they themselves did not ask the question. Maybe they were still smarting from their last confrontation with Jesus and pondering his parables. They sent their disciples instead - like sending the interns out to face the cameras! But they sent them with some Herodians. The Pharisees were the keepers of the laws of Moses and the Herodians sided with Rome to maintain peace. Now the very fact that they came together alerted Jesus that a trap was being set. For normally these two groups did not mix but to trap Jesus they joined forces. For the question they planned to ask would either show that Jesus supported the Jewish laws and traditions and therefore did not support Rome or he would prove to be a supporter of Rome and loose his hold on the people. Either way Jesus answered they thought they could get him with this question.

They started with flattery - and clearly they do not mean what they say. But then they asked - *Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?* Now note that the question is "*Is it lawful?*" That is where they think they have set the trap - in what the law says. But Jesus sees through the trap. His response - Why are you trying to trap me? You are the hypocrites! For Jesus knew both the Pharisees and the Herodians claimed to follow the laws of Moses but each had compromised their beliefs for power over the people.

Then Jesus did something powerful. We know this story so well. It's the old show me the money! Show me the coin one must use to pay taxes to the emperor. Note - Jesus doesn't produce the coin from his own purse. We believe this scene takes place in the Temple and in the Temple the emperor's money was not used. Because for the Jewish people it was a graven image for it bore the image of Caesar and declared him divine. The Jews had their own currency. The very fact that either one of the disciples of the Pharisees or a Herodian produced the denarii showed their hypocrisy. But what a powerful object lesson. For Jesus said "*Whose head is this and whose title?*" *The emperor's* they responded. Now comes the punch line that we all know so well - *Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's* - ahh the Pharisees think we got him! But Jesus was not

finished...hear it again *“Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s.”* OHHHHHHH! Those who heard Jesus were amazed and left...they couldn’t even think of anything to say and there would be no arrest that day.

Why? Because every faithful Jew - Pharisee, Sadducee or Herodian knew the words of the Psalm we began our worship with today - *“The earth is the Lord’s and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it...”* (Psalm 24:1) And the words from Genesis that proclaimed that God’s image was upon only one thing in all the universe. God’s image was impressed, not on the coins of the empire, but upon human life itself. *“Then God said, ‘Let us make man in our image, after our likeness’ ... So God created man in his image ... male and female he created them.”* (Genesis 1:26, 27) The trap had failed....And Jesus had left them with much to think about.

And Jesus’ words give us much to think about as well. This is not a passage, my friends, about the separation of church and state although you no doubt have heard sermons on that subject using this passage. It is also not a passage about the importance of fulfilling our civic duties and paying taxes. Although Jesus did say - whether we like to hear it or not that we should pay our taxes. Sorry friends, but if we want to enjoy the benefits of living in the United States of America we need to pay our taxes. But what we are called to contemplate in this passage is what it means to give to God what is God’s.

The late Danny Thomas lost his life savings of \$600.00 at a time when he was out of work. He and his wife, Rosie, had a baby on the way, and they needed money. Danny worked at part-time jobs so Rosie could buy groceries. He also borrowed money from friends. It was a tough time in his life. A week before the baby was born, Danny had the grand total of seven dollars and eighty-five cents to his name. What would he do? “My despair led me to my first exposure to the powers of faith,” Danny would later recall.

One Sunday morning Danny went to church. When the offering plate was passed he put in his “usual one dollar.” But something unexpected happened that day. A special missions offering was

taken. The priest explained where the mission offering would go, and Danny felt he had to give something. “I got carried away,” Danny said, “and ended up giving my seven dollars.” He had given away all his money that Sunday. What in the world had he done? He walked up to the altar rail, got on his knees and prayed aloud. “Look, I’ve given my last seven bucks,” he prayed. “I need it back tenfold because I’ve got a kid on the way, and I have to pay the hospital bill.” He went home with a mere eighty-five cents in his pocket--all the money he had in the world. “You won’t believe this,” Danny Thomas later wrote, “but the next morning the phone rang in the rooming house hall.” It was a job offer. He was offered a part in a commercial. The job wasn’t much but the pay was good--seventy-five dollars. “I literally dropped the telephone receiver,” Danny remembered. “First I whooped with joy; then an eerie feeling came over me.” He remembered what he had prayed at church the day before. “The seventy-five-dollar fee,” he said, “unheard of for me at that time, was almost exactly ten times the amount of money I had donated to the church.” (Danny Thomas, *Make Room for Danny* (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1991), pp. 68-70 <https://sermons.com/sermon/like-parent-like-child/1348304>.)

The important truth about this story is that this experience set Danny Thomas on a road to a lifelong allegiance to God. Those of you who know his story know that St. Jude’s Hospital for Children stands today as silent testimony to that allegiance - a total allegiance to give his life and all he could to others. And the world is a better place because of the depth of his commitment to give back to God for the blessings that God had given him. That is what happens when we give our whole lives to God.

The problem Jesus identified was that the Pharisees and the Herodians were only giving parts of themselves to God. The Pharisees were more concerned with keeping the letter of the law and their very questions asked over and over again showed that they were not listening to the answers being provided. The Herodians had compromised their beliefs to receive the benefits from those in power - the Romans. Neither one of them had given total allegiance to God. They had divided loyalties.

I find myself wondering if that is part of what has happened to the church of Jesus Christ today and through the centuries. Have Christians around the world, have Christians especially in the United States of America, have we here at Covenant Presbyterian Church - only been willing to give a part of ourselves to God? Have we compartmentalized our faith to where we have majored in the minors - spending more time trying to maintain our traditions and our way of life that is comfortable - instead of allowing Christ's call to convict us and move us to action? Have we been so busy keeping the status quo that we have missed what Jesus said over and over again about what it means to walk the walk?

A member of this church commented to me this week that she and her husband had come to realize that they were part-time Christians. And friends, this is a very committed member of this church. But she and her husband realized that there was so much more they could give back to God if they were just willing to do that. What about the rest of us? Are we just part-time Christians? Only willing to give back to God the parts that are easy for us to give - one morning a week, a small portion of income, time on the projects that we enjoy but avoiding the things that challenge us. Are we giving back to God what is God's?

Remember the old story about a chicken and a pig who wanted to show their gratitude for all the farmer's care and protection? The chicken decided that, given the limitations placed upon them, the best they could do was to provide the farmer with a delicious ham and eggs breakfast. So the chicken told the pig what she had decided. The pig responded, "For you, a ham and eggs breakfast is a gesture of great generosity, but for me, it is an act of total commitment!"

Are we more like the chicken than the pig? Willing to give a portion of our lives to God but not willing to go all the way to the cross with Jesus?

There is a group in our church that is working hard to figure out what it will take for Covenant Presbyterian Church to continue to do ministry on the corner of Canton and Piedmont for years to come. We are becoming more and more convinced that the first step lies in our commitment to Jesus

Christ. We cannot be a church of part-time Christians and survive. We need to be all in - totally committed to Christ's way of life. We are called to give to God what is God's and that is our time, our talents, our money and our whole lives. Christ challenges us not to be keepers of the law and the traditions but to be the bearers of the good news of Jesus Christ. And that requires us to get out of our comfort zones and to follow Jesus Christ into the world. It begins with each of us seeing ourselves as servants - as missionaries - who are excited about the good news of Jesus Christ and convinced that what God offers is something that everyone needs to hear and experience. We must be willing to talk about our faith to others and to invite others to share the journey. We recognize that many may not feel equipped to be missionaries. We may never have been taught to share our faith with others. We are working on some ways to help us learn how to do that. You will be hearing more about that in the months to come.

But right now I want to ask you to pray fervently for this church. To pray for our Session and the Evangelism committee and the Pneumatrix team. To pray for the community surrounding our church. And to pray that God will transform our hearts and minds leading us to a deeper commitment, a total commitment to a life of faith, to lives committed to walking with Jesus all the way to the cross. For my friends, with that commitment, with the Spirit's power at work among us, we can do far more than we ever thought possible. May we give to God what is God's.....