

Nineteenth Sunday in Pentecost
Matthew 22:15–22, Psalm 99, I Thessalonians 1:1-10
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What better scripture passage could we have on this important day when we bring and present our pledge cards for God's work through the church? "Give, therefore, to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's." (Matthew 22:21)

For the last three Sundays, we've heard Jesus tell parables that put the Jewish leaders in a bad light. This morning they decide to go on the offensive in hopes of putting Jesus on the losing side for a change. Surely the question they devised about taxes will trip him up. If he says yes, Jews should willingly pay taxes to the Roman emperor, Caesar Augustus, the adoring crowds will think he is cooperating with the Roman occupiers and turn against him. Yet, if he says no, one should not pay taxes to Rome, he could be arrested for sedition and rebelliousness.

After seeing through their syrupy sweet, insincere flattery, Jesus confounds and amazes them with an answer that is still applicable today. We have to continually ask ourselves over and over as believers, what belongs to us, what belongs to the state and what belongs to God? It seems to me we partially answer that question each year when we sit down to consider how much we will give to Jesus' church for the upcoming year.

In Jesus' day, there were Roman coins and Jewish coins. Only coins minted by Rome could be used for the Roman taxes, and only Jewish coins could be used for the Temple taxes, purchases of sacrificial animals and offerings. The Roman coins were stamped with the image of the emperor. Since the second commandment forbade Jews to worship graven images, many devout Jews detested even having to handle Roman money bearing human busts and animals. Jewish coins would have plants, menorahs or other Jewish symbols stamped on them.

No one could argue with Jesus that a Roman coin was the property of Rome. The question then became and still persists, "What belongs to God?" Genesis chapter 1 says that on the sixth day God made man in God's image, male and female God made them. Coins may have the image of people and animals on them, but every human being bears the image and likeness of God. We discern God's greatness in the vast variety of people made in God's likeness all around the globe – people of all sizes, colors and shapes.

And if we believe, as the first chapter of Genesis points out, that on days one-through-five God made everything else, then, we are "owners" of very little. While I don't believe Genesis chapters 1 and 2 literally, I do believe that the imaginative mind and power behind this incredibly diverse and complex creation is the Holy One's.

I'll never forget the time I heard my seminary Dean, Dick Reid, say, "It's not a matter of how much of what belongs to us that we give away, but rather how much of that which belongs to God we dare keep for ourselves." Each year when we make our pledge to the church, we get to reconsider our priorities and what belongs to whom.

Last week I talked a little about the blessings we have received through the use of these ample buildings and grounds. Today I want to emphasize the great value of the ministries we can and do participate in and the blessings we and others receive from them.

St. Paul, writing perhaps his first and earliest letter to the young church in Thessalonica in modern day Greece, sings their praises because "...the word of the Lord has sounded forth..." from them beyond their city and into the surrounding regions. We, too, are doing the work of Christ beyond these walls in Petersburg, in Virginia, across the country and around the world. Maureen McClure has just revised an outreach booklet which describes the various projects we support physically and/or financially. Our people are involved in nearly 20 church-sponsored ministries from tutoring school-age children and offering a week-long summer reading camp to meal preparation for homeless men and hungry families. Some of our members deliver Meals on Wheels while others purchase and deliver Christmas presents for children whose parents are incarcerated. Handmade quilts comfort the sick and house repairs help keep the elderly in their homes.

In addition, thousands of dollars each year are sent to several local, national and overseas ministries, some of which provide micro-loans to people in developing countries as well as emergency aid after a natural disaster at home or abroad. Our Church Women and our Youth Community have their own projects and charities that they support with their time and financial resources as well.

We are a generous and caring congregation eager to give for the relief of the less fortunate. As I said last week, many of us also participate in ministries to our own members mostly within these walls. They involve spiritual growth and eating mostly, but also our fine music programs and a ministry to families in grief through the Celebrations of Life receptions after funerals.

Most of this I've just mentioned wouldn't be possible without the efforts and skills of our excellent staff. Our parish secretary works only 14 hours a week these days, but just last week she had to print four different service bulletins. The cost of these ministries I've mentioned and supporting staff runs some \$320,000, the high cost of doing effective ministry. That's around 80 percent of our overall budget of \$390,000. Needless to say, your pledge matters if we are to continue to be a church that changes lives for God and good including our own. As so many of us have found out, even if no one else benefited from our efforts to help others, we receive abundant blessings. Blessed are those who give because everyone receives.

This Sunday we ask you to place your pledge envelope in the offering plate along with your weekly offering. All that will then be brought forward while we sing the doxology – “Praise God from whom all blessings flow.” Just like every other Sunday, the plates are handed to me and I raise them up to God. Then I place them on the altar along with the bread and wine, which is also brought forward and raised up to God. The altar or holy table is symbolically, if not literally, a meeting place for the divine and humanity – the bread and wine representing Jesus, the Son of God, and the offering of our treasure representing each of us. Every Sunday the altar table brings God and us together. Then when we eat the bread and drink the wine, we are further united with Christ. We in him and He in us.

Our liturgical worship may not be entertaining, but it is always rich in meaning as we enter into the mysterious presence of the all-giving God beyond adequate names and sufficient comprehension. Each day we offer ourselves to God’s service. Each Sunday we offer ourselves to God through the sacrifice of our praise and our treasure.

I am reminded of a story I believe Jim Ukrop told about giving his two sons a one dollar weekly allowance when they were young. He told them that 10 cents of it would have to be put in the offering plate each Sunday at church. One son didn’t like the idea of having to give up a dime every week, but the other said, “That’s great! We get to keep ninety cents.”

Today may we be grateful and pleased with how much we give and how much more we get to keep from the God from whom all blessing flow and to whom all things belong. AMEN.