

Sermon for October 19, 2014 (Proper 24, Year A)
Offered by Nathan Ferrell at The Episcopal Church of Saint Mary

Texts: 1 Thessalonians 1:1-10; Matthew 22:15-22

Know what: all things belong to God

So what: all of life is to be lived in the knowledge and presence of God

Now what: choose to live each moment in the awareness of God

Title: The Things That Are God's

“Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's” (Matthew 22:21).

What are the things in your life that belong to God?

Sunday mornings? This hour to hour-and-a-half that you spend at Saint Mary's on Sunday mornings?

What about your Tuesday afternoons? And Friday nights?

What about your driving in the car? Does that belong to God?

How about your leaf-raking, and your house-cleaning, your shopping and your means of employment?

Are these the things of God?

“Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's.”

Surely this is one of the teachings of Jesus most often quoted, AND most easily misunderstood.

Here in Matthew's Gospel, the conflict between Jesus and the leaders in Jerusalem continues to intensify.

In today's Gospel text, an attempt is made to trap Jesus by forcing him to declare treason against the emperor – by saying that the Roman head tax was not to be paid – OR by to offend his listeners - by acknowledging Rome as their rightful ruler.

Of course, he deftly avoids their trap and speaks these now famous words.

In the church, we read these words always in Autumn, at the time of year when most parishes are ramping up their annual stewardship campaigns.

And so the temptation for all of us preachers is to use this text to launch into a discussion of the right and ethical use of money.

But is that what Jesus is truly speaking of here? Is this a teaching about money?

Well, yes – and no. It is a teaching about humanity, and money is certainly included.

It is important to know that this Roman tax was one demanded from every person for the sheer privilege of living within the Roman Empire. The annual payment had to be made in the Roman denarius – the equivalent to that which was earned by a laborer for one full day of work.

Not only was this tax odious to the Jewish people, because it was an annual reminder of their forced subjugation by the Romans, but the denarius coin itself was offensive and repulsive.

On one side was the image of the emperor's head, and on the other was the inscription, "Tiberius Caesar, son of the divine Augustus, most high priest".

Sheer blasphemy was this coin – the very epitome of all that was hated about the Romans.

In his wisdom, the Lord used the blasphemy of Rome to teach the way of God in humanity.

An anonymous writer in the early church, still living under Roman rule, explained the Lord's teaching in this way:

"The image of God is not depicted on gold but imaged in humanity. The coin of Caesar is gold; that of God, [is] humanity. Caesar is seen in his currency; God, however, is known through human beings" (Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: Matthew 14-28, InterVarsity Press, 2002, p. 150).

The currency of God is humanity.

Real, everyday human lives – as they are actually lived on planet earth.

“Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s.”

In these words, the Lord Jesus rejects every dualistic approach to life.

God is one. The earth is one. All of life belongs to God.

There is no such thing as a distinction between secular things and sacred things, things merely human and things godly – as if these two categories occurred in two different, parallel worlds.

All of life belongs to God. Everything that exists is made holy by how it is used and by human intention.

This is important, my friends, and I hope that you can grasp how life-changing this is.

You see, the kind of life into which our Teacher, our Master, is leading us is one in which we relate to God in every single aspect of existence.

Every single act of life, without exception.

That’s not something with which most of us are accustomed, but it can be. Thankfully, we have some faithful guides in learning how to see in this way.

Did you know that there is a prayer in the Jewish tradition to be used every time a person uses a toilet? It’s true. It goes like this.

“Blessed are You, Lord our God, King of the universe, Who formed man with wisdom and created within him many openings and many hollows. It is obvious and known before Your Throne of Glory that if even one of them ruptures, or if even one of them becomes blocked, it would be impossible to survive and to stand before You. Blessed are You, Lord, Who heals all flesh and acts wondrously.”

That's very descriptive, isn't it? And truthful!
And a bit odd, as well, right?

I admit. This kind of toilet prayer has not been a regular part of my life, but why not?

After all, what are the things that are God's? Is there anything in human life that does not, in some way, bear the divine image and likeness?

This singular, wholistic, integrated approach to life is something that the old Celtic peoples seemed to understand and embody quite instinctively.

In the 18th century, Alexander Carmichael recorded old Gaelic prayers and chants and songs throughout his life-time of working and traveling throughout the Hebrides of Scotland.

He recorded prayers said by the people in every conceivable act of their lives. They are fascinating to read. Here is a funny little prayer said by a Scottish woman as she went out to milk her cow in the morning.

“Bless, O God, my little cow. Bless, O God, my desire.
Bless my partnership, and the milking of my hands, O God.
Bless, O God, each teat. Bless, O God, each finger.
Bless each drop that goes into the pitcher, O God!”
(Carmina Gadelica, Lindisfarne Books, 1994, p. 344).

I don't think that we have any dairy farmers in our parish here in Falmouth, but that's okay. What do all of us learn from these Celtic ancestors in the faith?

When we serve a living and true God, as Paul expressed it, we enter into a living dialogue with the Creator that includes every second of human existence.

It is this Gospel-inspired worldview that enabled St. Francis of Assisi to praise and bless God for all of the different parts of creation – for sun and moon and water and wind and earth – *and even for death*.

Francis is quite unique in writing this type of prayer. As his own death approached in the year 1226, Francis added a verse to his famous Canticle of Creation already composed and in use by his community.

He added these words: “Praised be You, my Lord, through our Sister Bodily Death, from whom no one living can escape.”

How does one learn to praise God in every single experience of life, even when facing the inevitable approach of death?

“Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s.”

God is one. The earth is one. All of life belongs to God.

Take a moment and think about your life. All of it. Let every part of your life pass by your mind’s eye.

Is there any aspect of life which seems to you to be separate from the knowledge and the presence of God?

Is there any part of it which you have pretended is NOT related to God and which you need to give to God with a clear intention?

Maybe it is your money and your investments. Perhaps there are certain relationships which you have tried to keep separate from God.

No matter the details, know this as surely as you know anything:

All of life belongs to God, for all of life is lived with God, and all of life can be experienced as sacred if embraced with intention and prayer.

Will you choose to live your life in this way? To experience all of life as one, integrated, sacred, mysterious whole?

May it be so. Amen.