

Pentecost 20, Proper 24
St. Paul's/Resurrección, Mount Vernon, WA

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All or Nothing

The other day Dennis and Baudelina and I were talking. Dennis made the observation that every time the Bishop lays hands on you, you give up some freedom. Baudelina's joking reply was, "I'm going to run away!" I added that though we give up something, we gain other things. I think of three times I have had a bishop lay hands on my head. Every one of them required of me that I give up something, and every one of them gave me something in return.

The most recent was my priestly ordination. I gave up a focus on outreach (I didn't give up outreach, it just migrated to a less central part of my ministry.) I gave up (though it did not have to be that way) any thought of making my living outside the Church. I gained the role that had been calling to me for years—of standing at the Altar on behalf of God's people to administer sacramental grace.

The one before was my diaconal ordination. In it I gave up the anonymity of being a lay person. Once in a collar, you really never take it off. People started to call me "Father." My late Baptist brother-in-law called me "Brother-father." I gained entrance to peoples' lives and their issues that are often withheld from other lay people. I gained a certain amount of conferred trust--the confessions on airplanes, that sort of thing.

The time before that, however, was at my confirmation. In it I gave up any excuse for being a passive Christian, a "Christer," (you know, Christmas and Easter,) or even a Sunday Christian. Confirmation ordained me to the sacred order of the laity, and I took it very seriously, as we all should, for what I received in return was a share in the largest ministry of the church, the ministry of the laity.

Now these are not hard and fast lines in the sand. I was doing ministry that related to all these categories before the Bishop ever touched my head, but in them the Church recognized my successive roles, and I was invited into the restrictions and the freedoms of each one.

In Jesus' day, the Jews had a system that wasn't too unlike ours. Being born a Jew gave one rights and privileges in the Jewish community. Bar and Bat Mitzvahs developed later, but the foundations of them were in place in Jesus' day. Girls at age 12 and boys at age 13 were considered "under the Mitzvah, that is, they had reached the age of accountability when they were required to observe Torah. Luke tells the story of Jesus in the temple at about that age. If you remember the story, Jesus' family would go to Jerusalem for the Passover every year. When Jesus is 12, he stays behind, and they don't know it. After 3 days of frantic searching, they find him in the temple, talking with the teachers of the law. They are relieved and angry when they find him. "Where have you been? Why did you treat us this way?"

And his reply, "Did you not know I would be in my father's house?" I would like to imagine that at 12 years old, Jesus has an idea that being a good Jew requires something of him. He loses something and he gains something.

Jesus launches his ministry in his 30th year, and as the Gospel narratives show us, it is punctuated by these little challenges with the Pharisees. You see, Jesus doesn't really fit the Pharisee model very well, and he wasn't high-born enough to be a Sadducee. He was zealous, but he wasn't a Zealot, and he challenged the establishment far too often to be unnoticed. It seems the Pharisees were always out to get him. And so, they set out to trap him.

"Is it right to pay taxes?"

If he says "yes," then he sides with the despised tax collectors, who had sold out to the occupying Romans and made their living at the expense of their own people. Besides, as the story indicates, the coin is stamped with the likeness of Caesar, who has exalted himself to be a god. One could argue that it was idolatrous. If he says, "no," he defies Roman law and can be handed over to them as an insurrectionist.

In Jesus' answer, he does not just sidestep the question. He opens up a new way of understanding things. He invites people out of simple, unreflective and reactive religion into true relationship:

"Give to Caesar what is Caesar's." In this world economy we must admit that, like it or not, the Romans are in charge. Just as the image of Caesar stamped on the coin makes it technically idolatrous, I suggest you give it back to him; send it back where it belongs.

But in God's world, it is different. If a coin is due Caesar, what is due God? As a member of the Jewish people, you are under a lifelong, all-encompassing obligation to Torah. Torah does not demand a mere tax; it demands total commitment. Caesar gets his coin back. God gets all of you.

And these two are not incompatible because they function on different levels of your being. Politics is external. It has to do with egos and power and money, what is mine and what is yours. Taxes are political. They are the assessment the government makes on one's wealth in order to have the resources necessary to govern. The rest belongs to the tax payer, and as long as the tax payer stays within the limits of the law, the government can't ask what one does with it. Some for them, the rest for me.

Spirit, on the other hand, is internal and flows outward. Are you living Torah? Is the world a different place because you seek to follow Torah? Are God's greatness and mercy more visible and active on earth because you are "bar mitzvah?" "Under the law?"

There is no "tax" under Torah. There is the tithe, the 10th. It is used to resource the Temple. But the rest is not just kicked back to you to do as you like. How you spend the

90% is also governed by Torah. It's all or nothing. This is what Jesus was saying to the Pharisees. Caesar wants a coin; God wants all of you.

And it is what Jesus tells us, too. It is easy to look at stewardship as funding the church budget for next year. (What are the needs? How much is needed? What is my share? What can I do to help out?) That is an act of generosity and even gratitude, but in the final analysis, it's like a tax. We expect to give to the church what I think I should, and keep the rest for myself.

Giving to God what is God's sets a much higher bar, a bar called stewardship. In it, the portion I give to the Church is a symbol of the whole. It recalls that I have been confirmed into the sacred order of the laity. All my life, not just 10% belongs to God. All of what I say I own, not just what I give to the Church, is really not mine, but God's. In baptism, and confirmed in confirmation, I give up something—I give up ownership. What I get in return is freedom.

- Freedom from the consumeristic addiction to acquiring things that underlies so much of our economy.
- Freedom to spend wisely, rather than selfishly.
- Freedom to live happily and contentedly on 90% of my income and never have to look at the end of the month with fear and trembling.

The discipline of proportional giving with the tithe as the goal frees us from being owned by our possessions and our bank accounts, and lets us manage them instead of them managing us. What my friend, the Rev. Angel Garibay in Mexico says is, “El 90 es más que el cien.” 90 is more than 100. If you give the 10% and content yourself to live on the remaining 90 you will see that it is more than enough. That is his testimony, the testimony of our Bishop and Karisse's and my testimony. 90 is more than 100.

The theme for the stewardship program this fall is "Where is your heart?"

Where is your heart? Is it wrapped up in the economies of the day, or the politics, or the social challenges we face? Are these what drive you? These things are important, but they are also earthly. They are Caesar's things. Is this where your heart is?

Or is giving God what is God's where your heart is? Do you yearn for that kind of surrender that grounds you in the freedom of God's love? Do you strive for that place in your heart from which you can engage economics, politics and social justice as acts of devotion to God? If so, what part of your earthly goods are you going to commit to God's kingdom's work as a symbol of the whole?

Give to Caesar the things that are Caesar's,
And give to God the things that are God's.