October 18, 2026
Pentecost 20 – Proper 24A
Trinity, St. Louis
The Rev. Dr. Paul Jacobson, *Rector*

Exodus 33:12-23
Psalm 99
1 Thessalonians 1:1-10
Matthew 22:15-22

In the Name of God: the Holy and Undivided Trinity. Amen.

For those of you who have been coming to church for some time, I imagine that you might hear today's admonition to "render unto Caesar the things that are Ceasar's" as the launch pad for a stewardship sermon. Well, fear not. At least not today.

This morning, in the middle of chapter 22, Matthew's narrative continues to intensify. Back in chapter 21, right after Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem, he cleared the moneychangers out of the Temple. In the days that followed, which we commemorate during Holy Week, Matthew gives us scenes of Jesus teaching in the Temple, during which his authority is challenged by various groups of religious leaders – chief priests, elders, scribes, and Pharisees. Jesus responds to their challenges with parables – the parables we've heard recently: The Parable of the Two Sons and the Parable of the Wedding Banquet. If this had been a debate tournament, Jesus would have walked away with all the medals. His opponents, on the other hand, just walked away.

And so, we come to today's account. Matthew offers us a little theatre of the absurd, complete with a contrived plot, stock heroes, and bad guys. Apparently tired of losing every argument, the Pharisees were searching for the ultimate "gotcha" question, so they "went and plotted to entrap" Jesus. Plotted to entrap. The gloves are off, and a new ally comes on stage – the Herodians.

The Herodians, mentioned only twice in Mark (3:6 and 12:13), and once here in Matthew, were supporters of Herod Antipas, a Jewish puppet ruler who collaborated with the Romans. The Herodians were politically powerful, but their cooperation with Rome involved compromises in observing Mosaic Law.

The Pharisees, on the other hand, despite our too-frequent disdain, were people who observed all the traditional standards and rituals of Judaism. They tithed. They were compassionate. They were moral. They were at the heart of virtue in the culture. And they opposed Rome's occupation.

Pharisees and Herodians together, Matthew tells us, plot to trap Jesus, asking him to take sides in their so-called dispute. If Jesus answers with the Pharisees, he

shows himself to be an enemy of Rome. If he agrees with the Herodians, he offends popular Jewish religious sensibilities. In either case, he'd be in great danger – it is the ultimate "gotcha."

The plotters begin with honeyed words, all smiles and sharp teeth: "Teacher, we know that you are sincere, and teach the way of God in accordance with truth, and show deference to no one; for you do not regard people with partiality."

Such fair words, but such foul intentions as they lay out their question: "Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?" Jesus recognizes their malice immediately and challenges them. "Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites?"

Jesus had once been tested by the Devil during his forty-day fast in the wilderness. Now it is people who attempt to entrap him, and he calls them what they are: hypocrites – for they have put themselves in opposition to the purposes of God.

Jesus then asks to see the coin used to pay the tax, and they brought him a denarius. I wonder if maybe there was still one on the ground from when Jesus overturned the tables of the moneychangers. Roman coins could not be used to pay the Temple tax, which is why money changers were in the Temple in the first place.

A denarius is a silver coin, a day's wage for an ordinary laborer. The coin they showed Jesus probably depicted the reigning emperor, Tiberius. A typical coin bore an image of the emperor and an inscription that read, "Tiberius Caesar, Augustus and Son of the Divine Augustus." The Romans often claimed divinity for their emperors. Here, Tiberius is depicted as heir to his divine predecessor Augustus. The Romans gloried in these titles; the Jews were scandalized by them.

Then Jesus, like Jesus does, turns the question back on them. "Whose head is this, and whose title?" The answer is obvious: the emperor's.

With his famous response, "Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor's," Jesus elevates the red herring of a sham tax controversy to a different level, far above the deadlock between revolutionary and collaborator. Jesus said, you can pay the emperor with coins like this. With his name and portrait on them, he has a just claim to them. "And" Jesus continues, "give to God the things that are God's."

What is it that belongs to God? Think about it for a minute. If the emperor claims a coin that bears his image, then certainly God has a claim on whatever bears God's image. Pharisees and Herodians alike knew the Scriptures. They knew the Genesis account of God making humanity in the divine image. It is right to pay taxes to the emperor using coins with his image. But it is a greater responsibility to give God what bears God's image, namely oneself.

At the end, Jesus shifts the scene from an attempt to entrap him in a tedious controversy to a recognition that, because each person is made in the divine image, each person is called upon to return their life to God.

Tiberius may have claimed to be the son of the divine Augustus. Our claim is that each human being is the child of the true Ruler, Israel's God. Confronted with this inescapable conclusion, the Herodians and Pharisees slip away as quietly as they can – perhaps, one might hope, to a better life.

Matthew's little bit of theatre does not answer every question about what it means to be both a citizen and a Christian. It does not resolve every quandary about obedience and taxation and resistance. It certainly does not tell us what political party to support, or how to vote. But it does make clear which questions take first place: Do I give myself to God? Am I in right relationship with God?

If the answer to these questions is "yes," then perhaps I can live justly in my other relationships, no matter how complex and challenging they may be. If the answer is "no," if I have somehow defrauded God, then everything else in my life will be off kilter, and I cannot live justly with others, however good my intentions.

We are wired in such a way that unless we do right by our most important relationships, we cannot do right by the rest. But if that most important relationship is somehow healed, somehow made whole, somehow repaired by the one who established it, which is to say, by the gift of God's grace, then our other relationships might have a hope of being set right as well.

Think about what happens when you come here on a Sunday morning. Do you come seeking something? Do you come bringing something? I suspect that it's a combination for each of you. In some places, like here at 8am, an offertory sentence from the 1928 Prayerbook is still used: *All things come of Thee, O Lord, and of Thine own have we given Thee* (1 Chronicles 29:14).

This is why I ask you to accept a wooden disc from the ushers when you arrive, so that when the offering plate comes by, you can offer something that represents you, your prayers, your concerns, and your joys. These simple discs mesh beautifully with the other gifts of bread, wine, money, and food for the hungry.

But, if we are to take Jesus seriously about offering to God the things that are God's, we might need to dig a little deeper. (8am) There's a wonderful phrase in the Eucharistic Prayers of Rite I that prays for God to *accept this our sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving, whereby we offer and present unto thee, O Lord, our selves, our souls and bodies.*

(10:30am) In the Eucharistic Prayer we use this morning (EOW 2), these words are heard: *Now gathered at your table, O God of all creation, … we offer to you our gifts of bread and wine, and ourselves, a living sacrifice*.

Just sit with that for a moment. What would it mean to the world, to God's world, to this neighborhood, or to this parish community for you, for us, to be serious about offering to God (8am) *our selves, our souls and bodies* or (10:30) *ourselves, a living sacrifice*?

How might it change the way you think about being a disciple of Jesus? How might it change the way you think about being a faithful citizen of this city, this state, this country? How could it affect the way you see the work that God has given you to do here at Trinity? How would it transform the way you love and serve God as a faithful witness of Christ to the world?

I'd like to think that we gather as a community of faith in this place, and at this Holy Table, out of the belief that Jesus Christ, at the cost of his life and by the power of his resurrection, sets right our primary relationship, sets right our connection with God, and in that gift of grace, empowers us with the hope of living justly in all our other relationships as well. Render unto God the things that are God's. Amen.