

October 19, 2008 23rd Sunday after Pentecost

Sermon: Flipping the Coin (Matthew 22:15-22)

I was talking with someone the other day who was having a hard time deciding which church to go to. I can sympathise. A few years back I was in Winnipeg on retreat, and was looking forward to the opportunity to attend a worship service that I didn't have to plan and lead. The problem I had was: where to go? There are an awful lot of churches in Winnipeg. My original plan was to go to Regents' Park United Church: they had a worship band that I really enjoyed at Conference Annual Meeting one year, and they're big on contemporary worship. Something new and different would be great! But I happened to go to a lecture by former Moderator and Senator Lois Wilson on the previous Wednesday night at Crescent Fort Rouge United Church, and they made me so welcome there that I wanted to go back. By Sunday morning I still couldn't make up my mind where to go: so I decided to flip a coin. Heads, I'd go to Crescent Fort Rouge, tails I'd go to Regents' Park. So I flipped the coin, and it came up heads. Well, I still wasn't sure, so I flipped it again: it came up tails. Okay, I said to myself, best two out of three. So I flipped it again, and it came up heads. Crescent Fort Rouge it was - which was where I really wanted to go anyway. And it was the right decision - the worship was wonderful and the people were glad to welcome me again. If the coin had come up tails twice, what would I have done? I don't know. I expect I would have gone to Crescent anyway. Sometimes the two sides of a coin don't address the complexity of the decisions we have to make.

That is the case in our reading from Matthew today. We hear the famous words: Give to Caesar what is Caesar's and give to God what is God's. I've read sermons on this passage that have interpreted it in completely opposite ways.

This passage has been understood by many people to say that there are two realms, those of politics and of religion. We should obey the state and obey God, and the two don't overlap. Try telling that to Martin Luther King. Try telling that to Nelson Mandela. Try telling that to Dietrich Bonhoeffer and the confessing church in Hitler's Germany. It has been tied with Romans 13, which has been used for centuries to justify passive obedience to the state, even when the state has been monstrous. How could Paul be referring to the state, asks one commentator, when he said that the authorities are put there by God, and whoever resists them resists God? (Rom 13:1-2) He lived under the brutal regime of Rome! ...perhaps the "authorities" Paul is talking about are the leaders of the church. In the surrounding chapters Paul is talking about the marks of the true church and how

we ought to live together in peace and love. Does it make sense to imagine Paul telling us to submit to anyone other than to God and to each other as Christians? It doesn't appear to be about obeying governments at all. And neither is Matthew 22, where Jesus' punch line is "Give to God what belongs to God." An interpretation of Jesus and Paul that completely separates politics and religion won't hold water. Any attempt to do so denies the reality that our religious beliefs should affect every single aspect of our lives, including our political life. I wonder how many of us had that in mind when we went to the polls this past week?

There are those who would argue that Jesus is showing the scribes up as hypocrites. After all, carrying Roman coins could be interpreted as collusion with Rome, and a betrayal of the commandments against graven images and the commandment to worship God alone that we heard read just a couple of weeks ago. These coins bore the image of Caesar, with the words, "son of the divine Augustus" - words that would be heresy for any faithful Jew.

There are commentators who argue that this passage is saying that the political and the religious are always in conflict; therefore, to bend in any way to the realities of the political system in which we live is to betray the gospel. Many sermons have been constructed, arguing that Christians should have nothing to do with the state, which is assumed to be a manifestation of the fallen nature of our present world. Many Christians would argue that this passage from Matthew's gospel supports the belief that state and religion are always in conflict, and that therefore the faithful should not pay taxes, not serve in any type of public service, and so on. This is the position taken by many who come from the Anabaptist tradition, in particular: Mennonites, Hutterites, some Baptists, etc. At best, Christians with this kind of understanding would argue that any loyalty to our government must necessarily conflict with our loyalty to God. For me, the picture is not that simple, on one side of the spectrum or the other. Neither unquestioning submission to our present economic and political system, nor a complete rejection of their value are acceptable to me.

There are times when our loyalty to God and to secular authorities are not in conflict. For example, unlike the taxes the Jews paid, which went straight into Caesar's coffers in far-off Rome, our taxes go to do many things which fit very well with the values we have been given by our God. We fund income support for people who are unable to work; we fund childcare in some cases so that children have a safe place to go; we fund public education so that no-one in Canada need be illiterate; we fund infrastructure that allows for safe travel, sanitation, and healthy drinking water; we fund medical care for anyone who

needs it – though admittedly, our nation’s commitment to those programs seems to be dwindling. We also recall that our tax dollars fund military build-up, questionable development projects that are tied to Canadian business interests, and we fund a government which, no matter which party is in power, caters to interests who do not always have the well-being of those on the margins at heart. This is the reality of our political and economic system in Canada, for better *and* for worse.

There are those who refuse to invest in this system, or choose to do so selectively, even withholding taxes in order to protest funding of things they see as contrary to God’s will. I suspect all of us have some ambivalence about these systems, and I think it’s hard for many of us to discern where our loyalties should lie, and where loyalty to God and to those systems might conflict.

There are times, however, when the conflict between loyalty to rulers and loyalty to God is seen in a dramatic fashion. I found an old sermon which described a situation from a few years back, soon after I left theological school. Some of you may even remember the incident. In 2002, a friend from seminary and fellow United Church Minister, George Feenstra, was involved in a demonstration with a large group of others against the cuts the BC government had been making to social programs. The premier referred to these demonstrators as “thugs”, and dismissed their protest. But the photographs and accounts of the events told a different story.

My friend George is a frail, gentle man in his 60s, who has a fire for the social gospel and a passion for bringing laughter and humour to the fight for justice. He was arrested for supposedly assaulting a police officer - but the pictures show something very different. They show a skinny, non-threatening man wearing a clown nose, with his face pushed into a stucco wall by a police officer. Several days later the marks on his head and on his wrists from being restrained still showed; he was also beaten while in custody. The protest had been peaceful, until George was arrested; then about 50 other protestors surrounded the police van, saying that they would disperse quietly if George was released. The police refused, and half a dozen more people were arrested. This is our country, folks. This is our tax dollars at work. Do you think it would be any different today?

B.C. Conference President at the time, Susan Lindenberger, issued this letter:

What do we say when one of our clergy is demonstrating, Jeremiah fashion, against the injustices of the day, and is forcibly arrested by the police? What provocation did this rather frail man offer that warranted being slammed against a stucco wall with such force that his glasses were knocked off and his forehead gashed? The photographs by Murray Bush put the lie to labelling such demonstrators as "thugs." What can we say when we as a church seem ineffective in engaging government in dialogue to find constructive solutions to the economic pinch, which is being loaded onto the backs of the most vulnerable members of our society? Before the violence escalates, it is time for government to meet with advocacy groups and the victims of social cutbacks, to find ways to share the economic burden. If our elected representatives want to lead us towards a more just and compassionate society, they must listen to all citizens, not just those with financial gain as their agenda. Mr. Premier, I ask you to begin meaningful consultations immediately about the impact of your current cutbacks in social services.

Unlike the people of Jesus' day, we choose our government – as we have this past week. Less than 60% of Canadians turned out to vote. What does that say about our sense of responsibility for each other and for our nation? Some have said that people get the government they deserve. Did we deserve the kind of government we saw in action with the incident with George? Have we made better choices since then? One thing is for sure: our loyalty to our government ends at the point where it conflicts with the sovereignty of God and the justice of God.

When we make a choice between Caesar and God, two things can be said. The *first* is that the choice is not always as simple as choosing one side of the coin or the other. It's rarely black or white, justice or injustice, right or wrong...although sometimes, clearly that IS the case. But discovering where our loyalties may lie as a Christian takes thought, prayer and discernment. It means going beyond the surface of things and taking another look at the issues, as Jesus challenged his hearers to do.

The *second thing* that must be said is that for a Christian, this is not a choice between equal sides, two equal possibilities. The way Jesus tells the story lets us know that the image of the Emperor on a coin has no comparison to the image of God, which dwells within us. It is the Spirit of God in us that claims our loyalty, first and foremost. The world and its principalities and powers can never compete, because it is not these powers who made us, who gave us life, who redeemed our lives, who transform our living. All earthly loyalties must always be

subordinate to our loyalty to God, who asked us to love God with our whole being, and to love our neighbours as we love ourselves.

As one sermon I read this week pointed out: Jesus refused to be tied to merely political comment. He didn't answer the Pharisees on their own terms. He shook up their whole world view and reminded them about absolute allegiance to God. All things are under God. That's the message. It is only then, we should note, there are real political and economic implications. Perhaps if the church got the message right it would also more clearly explore the daily implications more radically. (Dr Ross Langmead, Professor of Missiology at Whitley College)

My colleague George and I didn't agree on everything, when we were in seminary together. But I have great respect and admiration for what he was and is willing to risk for the sake of his loyalty to God, and to God's justice. George, and those like him, are prophets for our time, reminding us that all things are under God's sovereignty; that we can't make easy distinctions between the religious and the political, the world of the spirit and the day to day world.

On October 26th, we will celebrate Peace Sabbath, and on November 9th, we will recognize the sacrifices made during a time of war in our Remembrance Sunday service. On each of those Sundays, we will be taking a look at a different Christian approach to the tensions that lie between loyalty to God, and loyalty to the authorities that govern us. Different Christians have made different choices throughout the centuries, and continue to do so today. Hopefully the two points of view will provide you with some food for reflection and prayer.

One thing is certain: deciding our loyalties is not about choosing between two sides of a coin. There is only one coin: one world, which includes body and spirit, mind and soul, politics, economics, religion, nature, work, play...all of it. No matter how you flip it, it's still one coin: and it belongs to God. So when we decide what to do with it all - when we make decisions about all those different aspects of life - I suggest that waffling, coin-flipping, is not the way to go. Take a deep breath, say a prayer, and begin the process of finding out for yourself what your loyalty to God demands of you. Amen.

*Quotations in italics are from: **THE AUTHORITY OF THE EMPIRE**, A sermon on Matthew 22:15-22, 17 October 1999 by Dr Ross Langmead, Professor of Missiology at Whitley College*

And from a BC Conference Press Release circulated by BC Broadcast email on October 8, 2002.

