

BETWEEN SCYLLA AND CHARYBDIS

Sermon by Bryan Fredrickson, October 18, 2020

Matt. 22:15-22

It is interesting that this reading is placed on the Sunday after Tax Day for those on extension for filing their personal returns (October 15). Many experienced this late deadline this year since the coronavirus disrupted the April filing. I know CPA's have been scrambling all year long because tax season has been so drawn out.

This gospel story is another in a series of stories where a group of Pharisees is essentially harassing Jesus in an attempt to put him in a no-win situation. Here, they are trying to pit Jesus between his own Hebrew people and the Roman government. The question they posed to him: "Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar or not?" If he answers "yes," he would be seen as acquiescing in an unfair Roman tax system and conspiring with the Romans to extort money from his own people. If he answers "no," he would be cited by the Romans for making a treasonous statement. It's a situation not dissimilar to that which Odysseus faced in sailing his ship between the sea monster, Scylla, and the giant whirlpool, Charybdis.

What does Jesus do? He neatly sidesteps the question. He would have made a great candidate for US president. Without addressing whether it is legal or not, he brusquely asked for a coin, and by pointing to the engraving, illustrated that money is a function of government and that government needs a certain amount of it back in order to do its job. Apparently, the Roman government needed quite a lot of it back because of the sheer extent and opulence of the Roman Empire. There apparently was no Roman central bank to buy up bonds like our Federal Reserve does to generate cash for the US government. So, the Romans, in order to care for its vast holdings, had to raise cash through tax collection. Although Jesus seems to acknowledge that a certain amount of money has to go back to Caesar, in a rather back-handed slap to the Emperor, Jesus points out there are much more important things in life than paying taxes, such as "rendering unto God what is God's." Of course, Caesar thought himself to be the only god worthy of worship. Jesus was obviously referring to the God of the Hebrew people, not Caesar, who was a mere flawed human being.

What does it mean to "render unto God what is God's?" It means giving our time, talent and treasure to advance the Kingdom, to be sure. But was Jesus saying it is more than that? Micah said God requires us "To do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with God." By living lives as beacons of love and hope, we render unto

God what is God's. We bring heaven to earth when we give ourselves wholly to Him. This, I think, is what he was saying. This is the important thing.

Time and time again throughout the gospels, Jesus told people to pay attention to what matters most. Recall the story of Martha and Mary. Without dismissing the work Martha was doing in the kitchen, he insisted that it was Mary who was doing the necessary work by listening to his teaching and cultivating her inner spiritual growth. Then there is the story of the rich man who asks Jesus what is necessary to enter the Kingdom. Recall the exchange: Jesus told him to sell his possessions and come and follow him. Jesus knew this man's weakness was his over-identification with his possessions. The rich man sadly walked away, unable to let go of his attachment to material things, which was the necessary thing for his spiritual growth.

Then in sort of a twist on today's gospel, Jesus told the story of the Pharisee and the tax collector in the temple (Luke 18) where the Pharisee, in typical fashion, full of himself, prayed that he fasted twice a week and gave tithes of all that he possessed. He thanked God that he was not like other men: extortioners, unjust, adulterers, and even like the tax collector who was in the back of the temple beating his breast and asking God to be merciful on him, a sinner. (Recall that tax collectors in those days paid themselves out of what they collected. So, they were motivated to collect much more money than the amount necessary to satisfy the Roman levy). Yet, Jesus said it was the tax collector who was justified, not the Pharisee. Why? The Pharisee was too full of himself for there to be any room for God. The tax collector, in recognizing his failed humanity, was seeking forgiveness through humility. He was taking the first step in pursuing his own spiritual growth by admitting his vulnerability and desiring God's healing in his life.

We are all caught up, to one degree or another, with the challenges and obligations of everyday life "rendering unto Caesar what is Caesar's": paying our taxes, voting, and wearing a mask and remaining six feet apart. It is necessary that we fulfill our part of the social contract. But, as Jesus said, let's not forget what's really important. "The Kingdom of God is within you," he said. Our most important task is to allow God to reveal that Kingdom within so that each of us become more than good citizens of the state; we become citizens of a Realm not of this world but of God's, where love and forgiveness reign supreme.

The Psalmist said: "As a deer longs for flowing streams, so my soul longs for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When shall I come and behold the face of God?" That, I believe, is what Jesus meant when he said "render unto God what is God's."

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