

Twenty-ninth Sunday in Ordinary Time: October 18, 2020

St. Vincent de Paul Church, Baltimore

A Gospel Reflection (*Mt. 22:15-22*): What belongs to God?

In the Gospel reading today, Jesus demonstrated what an exceptional teacher He was, one that was superior to the Scribes. He was a problem for the Scribes and the Pharisees; He reminded them that His mission was about fulfilling the Law, not doing away with it nor ignoring it. Therein perhaps was the problem for those teachers and enforcers of Jewish law; they were stuck to the letter of it and certainly not the spirit of it. An astute Jesus knew if he answered their question regarding how lawful it was to pay taxes, any answer to that inquiry was not a win/win. Caesar was the sovereign authority in this political environment; he had a right to mint the coin. So, let the sovereign ruling authority go for it.

The evangelist, Matthew, had an agenda. This was it; the Jewish people needed to grasp that this person, Jesus, through both His messages and behaviors demonstrated that He was their long awaited Messiah.

To the puzzlement of the teaching authorities of his day, Jesus, honored and respected the poor. He saw himself both as one of them and with them. Matthew would not have used this word; but we can understand today that this teacher, Jesus, both understood and lived in *solidarity* with all his contemporaries.

In *Fratelli Tutti*, Pope Francis has reflected this sense of solidarity that Matthew wanted his Jewish brothers and sisters to understand. We can say that Jesus and the Matthew, wanted the official teachers of the Jews, the Scribes and Pharisees to comprehend that when “individuals recognize all peoples are our brothers and sisters,” any actions that follow need to include works that “entail working for a social and political order whose soul is social charity” (FT *Political Love*). That seems to be a much more open perspective than the rigid inflexibility that prevents an open awareness of a law’s intention.

If we line up with today’s Gospel, we need to see that the law does not need to become a chokehold for humanity. What Jesus called His followers to, was and is, a

law of love. This is one that follows the heart and is about freedom, freedom that would still allow us to “Repay to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God.”

So then, how might I answer, *What is God's? What belongs to God?* Thomas Merton (The Seven Story Mountain), came to see that the only way to live, was “to be in this world conscious that it is charged, charged with God’s presence.”

I liked the word “charged.” So, might charged mean something like a divine, ever ready battery? Not exactly. But for sure among other things, when I think about God, words come to mind like Power, Presence, Compassion, Mercy, a Lover. Most of all when I think about God these days, this energy is represented by the acknowledgement that God is Love. Love is a verb. We can think of love as ever present, infinite and active.

This encourages me to wonder that at the very roots of our existence, the answer to *What is God's?* is *everything*. What then might that mean in terms of how I respond and or act in relation to all that I encounter, such as others, the environment, God? Sigh, the questions and ponderings persist.

Let us be fair. There are a number of things going on simultaneously in this Gospel with the Pharisees and Zealots. Firstly, these two groups disagreed on who and how foreign powers might rule over God’s people and secondly they disagreed on who had the right to tax them. Thirdly, The Pharisees imagined they were doing a great good via their strict interpretation of the Law.

Fourthly, the truth was that the Pharisees’ relentless enforcement, inflexibility and lack of imagination, too often caused tremendous harm to others, especially the less fortunate. Wow! These dilemmas sound familiar to us even now. We are compelled to consider how this Gospel connects with all of us in our present time.

“So what is God’s? “Repay to God, what is God’s.” I thought again about Thomas Merton. He reminded us that we do not need to travel very far to find God. Merton said that if we accept and acknowledge Christ than we have already arrived, because “Christ has found us, first. “ Surely this assures us, we are God’s.

The Pharisees and Scribes closed their minds and hearts; they did not like what they saw and heard. They did not want this poor rabbi from Galilee to be their answer for a promised Messiah, nor did they wish Jesus “to find them. “ Their wills were stubborn and they ignored opportunities for the freedom to choose an inclusive love. Were the Pharisees and Scribes afraid? Probably. “When they heard this they were amazed and leaving him, they went away.”

What is God's? It would seem that God is Love and all that is, are God's, beloveds. The love of God is one that extends beyond the boundaries of culture, ethnic group and class. Of course it can be risky and challenging to go with this premise, *all is God's*. Yet, it is far more scary to deny to whom we belong. “There is no worse form of alienation than to feel uprooted, belonging to no one.” (#53 *Frattelli Tutti*)

For now let us use this premise, if everything is really God's, what does this mean now? To whom and to what do I render my loyalty and love? May God grant us the grace not to walk away amazed. May we stay in the trenches and behave and believe, that “we have already arrived in Christ.”

Gerry Fialkowski