Message: "Paying God's Due" – 10-18-26
Scripture: Matthew 22:15-22

> [15]Then the Pharisees went and plotted to entrap him in what he said. [16]So they sent their disciples to him, along with the Herodians, saying, "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. [17]Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?" [18]But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, "Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites? [19]Show me the coin used for the tax." And they brought him a denarius. [20]Then he said to them, "Whose head is this, and whose title?" [21]They answered, "The emperor's." Then he said to them, "Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's." [22]When they heard this, they were amazed; and they left him and went away.

I remember an experience years ago when I went to a drive-up ATM machine to get out some money – I plugged in my card and began punching some buttons to ask for some cash when I noticed there were already a few bills sticking out of the disbursement slot. There were three 20-dollar bills in that bundle; obviously, someone had left those behind in a previous transaction. That's when I decided that it would be great to go out for a very nice lunch somewhere, or to purchase those motorcycle gloves I'd been eying, or to go the corner casino to try my luck – after all, is that not what you do when fortune smiles your way? No, of course I didn't do any of those things, for it was obvious to me that my good fortune would have come through someone else's misfortune of being short $60 bucks, which was a lot of money back then. That money belonged to someone else. So I took the money, pulled over and parked, and went inside to return the funds. And I remember the surprised look on the teller's face when I told her what happened and handed her the cash; she thanked me and then said, "Most people wouldn't have returned it."

I want to believe she was wrong, that most people would return the funds, but I don't know, for money is a funny thing. It is a tool meant to facilitate transactions of various sorts, but it so quickly gets out of hand. Greed and thievery and misuse and deception seem to creep into its use all the time; it is used for the most depraved excesses and the most destructive violence humans undertake, skewing elections and funding weapons and fueling scandals of every imaginable kind. Money is a tool meant to enable society to work to some degree of relational cohesion, but it often produces precisely the opposite, for we humans have a tendency to move quickly from need to desire, and desires are notorious for getting out of hand. And, of course, money is one of the main ways humans pursue desires far beyond what is needed.

Jesus knew this, of course, as did everyone in earshot of his conversation with the Herodians and the Pharisees on that day reflected in our scripture passage. Mostly, what he knew was that money was a funny thing, where greed and power and influence and desire and need all intersected. In that intersection

the Herodians and Pharisees sought to trap Jesus in an either-or indictment by asking the yes or no question "Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor or not?" If he answered it was lawful, he'd blaspheme according to the Pharisees; but if he answered it wasn't lawful, he'd be seen as an enemy of the state the Herodians complied with. It was a well-set trap -- but Jesus was not unaware of what they were really after.

In the seven commentaries I read that focused on this passage, they all said that Jesus was brilliant in his response when he said "Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's." Forgive me, but I do not feel Jesus is being brilliant here, but is simply reflecting a much more humble and common-sense understanding that faith always promotes, namely, that EVERYTHING IS GOD'S. EVERYONE IS GOD'S. All of creation; all of the universe. Every atom, molecule, and cell; every planet, solar system, and galaxy. EVERYTHING IS GOD'S. Our divisions and separations and tools and structures are human constructs that will always fall short of God's design; the coin that bears Caesar's image may belong to Caesar, but all of creation, including all humans, including even Caesar, belong to God.

This points us to the main issue Jesus is bringing to light, and it is the issue of belonging. What belongs to Caesar? What belongs to God? What does belonging to something or someone mean? And what is it that belongs to something or someone? Is it property or resources or products or goods that are the objects of belonging? Or does allegiance, or devotion, or obedience, or worship, define what belonging means? So often we are so eager to possess something that we forget what belonging means beyond that possession and lose sight of the more important parts of life that possession may point to but can never embody; but on the other hand, our worldly connections, the groups we belong to ourselves, can induce a myopia that likewise reduces our world to matters of lesser significance. Both instances, considering what belongs to us, and how we belong to something or someone, can make for one tremendous headache of relational uncertainty, where we wind up valuing the wrong things, or devaluing what matters most – and both things happen all the time.

I had a recent experience that brought this matter to my attention in a way that made me very sad. Some of you know that I have been working with the Missoula Interfaith Collaborative to bring some of our different faith communities to the table for fellowship and interaction. To be quite specific, I've been meeting with Rabbi Laurie Franklin, who retired from Temple Har Shalom a

few years back, and Jesse Jaegar, who is the Action Network Manager at Missoula Interfaith Collaborative; we've been meeting to strategize how best to reach out to evangelical churches who have thus far been pretty absent at our collaborative tables. We have recognized that there are rather profound separations between mainline protestant denominations and the more evangelical and conservative facets of organized religion, some of which have been very visible in our national politics in ways that are, shall we say, highly worrisome. But we know it is terribly wrong to assume what is happening nationally represents all evangelicals; it is always wrong to stereotype, and it is important to challenge assumptions. Thus, our efforts to bridge the disparities.

In any event, the three of us reached out to several evangelical churches and their pastors to invite them to meet, simply to get to know each other. The silence of their responses was deafening. So, we thought we'd take a more direct approach and personally invite the pastors to a one-on-one conversation over coffee. Again, silence – no returned phone calls, no email replies, nothing. I took it one step further – I reached out to a pastor I knew by using a rather complex phone menu appointment making template found on his church's website; that template produced a form asking who you are, what your contact information is, and what you would like to talk with the pastor about. I filled it all out and punched "send," hoping to hear back soon – and I did! I received a response from this pastor, whom I know from past interactions and greatly respect; in his response he let me know they are just too busy to engage in any such dialogue right now. He let me know all that they were doing, and it was very impressive – they have a very busy church, helping people all over the place. I wrote back, thanking him for his detailed message and shared with him my gratitude for all he was doing through his church for those in need. And I ended my note with an open invitation to have coffee sometime, not necessarily in the desire to see how we could work together, but simply as pastor to pastor doing similar work.

I thought that was the end of it, but I was wrong. This pastor, a few days later, sent me another note, a more personal one in content. He affirmed that they were busy and would struggle as a church to take on any more – but then he said something that made my heart terribly sad. He said he would very much like to have a conversation with me, but if he were to be seen talking with me or interacting with me or other groups outside of their fellowship, he would be likely to face great criticism from his church leadership for talking with me as a pastor

of an theologically-incorrect ministry. In other words, his congregation thinks other church's theologies are wrong – including ours. Including mine.

This made me sad for I felt the strong sense that this pastor felt trapped, that he walks around feeling like there is a target on his back with theological arrows pointed at it coming from various sides – and he is just praying none of those arrows will let fly. Again, I have great respect for this pastor, but worry so much for him regarding how his congregation sees itself – as possessing the only correct understanding of God; that somehow God belongs to them, and them alone. I sense this pastor is walking a tightrope with ends held by theological judges – and that he spends a significant amount of time praying that they won't let go.

Jesus entertains the question of the Herodians and the Pharisees by raising the bar on the only real question that matters -- who belongs to God? Not whom does God belong to, for God will not be owned; God will never be an isolated divinity sovereign over a particular people, denomination, culture, or religion. Who belongs to God? Such belonging is not defined by having the correct theology, the best worship rituals, the greatest cathedrals or the most glorious music. Who belongs to God? Such belonging is never defined by those who have the loudest voices or the most powerful sermons or who are most adept at proof-texting or Bible memorization.

Who belongs to God? All of us belong to God. Those we consider strangers belong to God. Those we consider enemies belong to God. Caesar belongs to God; President Trump does too. All of creation belongs to God. It is not for us to ever say otherwise.

But there is a great difference between people – the difference between those who recognize God's ownership of their lives, and those who do not. Those who do not recognize God's ownership of their lives must work extremely hard to find or construct a god suited to their desires, for everyone worships something; power, money, violence, possessions, fame, influence, sports teams, food obsessions, addictive substances (OK, OK, motorcycles!)…….there are many gods out there to worship, none of which are up to the job for long. But those who embrace God's ownership of their lives gain a freedom that can be had no other way – the freedom to be who they truly are, how God made us as we could never make ourselves, and to join with others embracing the same belonging. They have discovered that there is no need to waste time on what belongs to who when we discover the amazing grace that we belong to each other just as we belong to God.

I'd like to end this message today by quoting a very famous theologian – you've heard of the historical theologians Thomas Aquinas? Karl Barth? Martin Luther? St. Augustine? Well, this theologian beats them all, insofar as a quote that captures wat Jesus was trying to get across in this scene with the coin. I'm speaking, of course, about the recently-deceased theologian named Dolly Parton, who had a way with words, and not just in song lyrics. Her comments on her faith understanding were often quite simple but profound. Here is the quote: "If you are a true Christian, your heart is open, to everybody and everything." Thank you Dolly for making what Jesus was trying to get across clear.