

“PRAISE OR PROPHET”

Based on Matthew 22:15-22

It seemed a rather clever and simple means of getting the attention of the Roman authorities, and, of getting rid of the preacher named Jesus: trap him in his own words. Nothing angered the Romans faster than refusing to pay taxes or keep the peace on a Saturday night at the pub. Much the same these days. You can complain mightily about the increase on your water bill or the use of your property tax money, but at the end of the day, you either pay the bill, or you find the Bi-Law Officer on your door step, or a nasty note in the mail informing you that your house is being sold for back taxes! Pay your bills is the obvious answer.

And that's exactly what Jesus said. And the intellectually clever plan fell to pieces before the Pharisee's very eyes. They were 'amazed' scripture tells us. I can't help but think that 'anger' would be a more appropriate and honest response. No one likes to be made a fool in, especially in front of their friends or peers. It only made them try harder the next time. Which of course Jesus knew was coming. History tells us, finally succeeded a couple of chapters later in the Gospel of Matthew. Jesus was arrested, attempts by

Pilate to trap Jesus in his own words, and finally, a quick death on a cross, before too much light could be shed on the flimsy argument. We know the story. But we also know the end of the story, too, now don't we?

But beneath obvious attempt to entrap Jesus, the Pharisees brought up an even more complex question, every generation of Christian believers has had to struggle with. Just what is Caesar's, and what is God's?

Show me the coin used for paying the tax.” They brought him a denarius, and he asked them, “Whose image is this? And whose inscription?” “Caesar's,” they replied.

Then he said to them, “So give back to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's.” (v19-20)

Someone said at Bible study this week, “But doesn't everything belong to God?” “Well,” I think I would answer, “Yes. I think that those of us sitting here today would recognize the idea, that embedded in each and every task of our day, there is a whisper of God and His hand at work: about how we collect, spend and share our money, our time, our selves.” But at the

same time, there is the practical side of things. We still have to pay the hydro and the heat if we wish to stay warm, and watch the football game Sunday afternoon. One may eat steak for dinner, and another a tin of tuna, but we all still need food, and a pillow at night. The ways of the world, constantly rub raw, the line between the sacred and the secular. Where should the line be? Who gets to draw the line? And from the church's perspective, what do we do when the line blurs between the 'needs of ministry' and the 'needs of money'?

It is not a comfortable conversation, now is it? And nothing these days, except perhaps a discussion about politics, can dampen a dinner party faster than a conversation about money. Either you have it, or you don't, or you're somewhere in between. Truth is, you and the one next to you will never entirely agree on how much should be spent on what and when. That's why many couples struggle to have good financial conversations about family matters. That's why Annual meetings at churches are often tense and anxious. Everyone has a different idea of what our money should do, for ourselves, and for our

community. Nothing much has changed from the days of Caesar!

But perhaps the “Give to Caesar’s what is Caesar’s” is only distracting us from the real question. Perhaps this story is not really about money at all. Perhaps that rub between the secular and the sacred is supposed to be rough and raw, because it makes us constantly ask ourselves meaningful questions. What would Jesus do in this situation? How can I be a blessing in this moment? Is there something I can share or give to my neighbours, my family, my church, my community that is a living example of Christ’s message of love and generosity? What might bring a smile to one, or relief to another? Maybe it costs some money. Maybe it just takes a little time. Maybe it means a slight break from the daily routine. Maybe it simply

is a little effort from deep in the belly.

If everything is God’s, and every thought and every intention begins with His presence in our heart, it makes every action, or gesture in some way, holy. It makes generosity not feel so onerous and obligatory, but actually fulfilling. It makes making an effort, effortless, and often what people tell me with some surprise, energizing. It can even make paying the bills a little less of a nail biting, and teeth gnashing experience.

The sacred and the secular will always live side by side, but never together. The world of every generation will tell anyone who listens what we should have and what we should do. But we are people, who live in this world, but chose also, to live a very different life within our hearts and souls. And in this world, the whispers of God carry the day,

motivate our intentions, and calm our tired spirits. Can these worlds live side by side? Yes. Will the line between the world and The Way ever become easy to navigate? Never. The only question is, which side of the line do you lean towards? That, you do have the ability to change.

When the Pharisees were trying to trap Jesus they said,

“Teacher,” they said, “we know that you are a man of integrity and that you teach the way of God in accordance with the truth. You aren’t swayed by others, because you pay no

attention to who they are.
(v15-16)

Live your life with integrity.

Speak the truth.

Pay your bills...but

Sway your heart toward the sacred side of the line.

Forget the praise, be a prophet.
Amen.