

**"Knowing Jesus"**  
**Sermon for the Eighteenth Sunday in Kingdomtide**  
**Lectionary Year A**  
**October 16, 2011**  
**Text: Matthew 22:15-22**  
**Dr. David T. Howeth**

The passage of scripture for this morning from the Gospel of Matthew is a familiar one to those of us who have grown up in the church. It is so well-known primarily because it is used, particularly at this time of year, as the basis for a stewardship sermon. Almost every preacher, including myself, has used this text to talk about the need for Christians to be responsible citizens in the paying of their taxes to the government, but to be even more responsible in the paying of their tithes to the church.

What we give to the emperor, so to speak, is important, but since God is to have ultimate authority over our lives, what we give to him is even more important. The government "claims," a certain portion of our lives, but it is God who is to have complete and total claim over our lives. Since all things actually belong to him, we owe him far more than we owe any other entity or institution in our world. That is the gist of most stewardship sermons preached on the basis of this text.

By the way, my father keeps me informed on what our friend Don Yeager preaches on from week to week at First UMC in Gainesville, and

when I talked to my dad last week he told me that Don was preaching a whole series of sermons on stewardship right now. A whole series. Of course, I really can't blame Don. First UMC owes millions of dollars on its facility, while we owe next to nothing on ours in comparison. But theirs is an incomparably beautiful church, one of the most attractive in our whole Conference. It is obvious that the membership takes great pride in the way their facility looks, but as is true of anything that is truly special and unique, it comes with a large price tag, which requires a rather high level of financial commitment from those who greatly value it.

But stewardship sermons are not really my thing. The longest "series" of sermons on stewardship I have preached in my career is a series of two, and that was a stretch for me. I don't like talking about money from the pulpit. The way I figure it, I shouldn't have to. I make sure you are informed from week to week where the church stands financially. If you really love and care about the church the way you say you do, you will give the money that's needed to meet our obligations. It's just that simple.

The way I see it is that it is my job as the primary administrator of the church is to work with the Finance Committee and the Church Council to keep our expenses as low as possible, and I have done that for the past six years. We operate on a bare-bones budget here at

Schreiber. My role as pastor is to be responsibly frugal; your role as the congregation is to be appropriately generous. I have done my job, so that means the rest is up to you. Enough said. That's all you're going to get from me on the subject of stewardship.

So back to our text for this morning. The way I see this passage of scripture is a little bit differently than viewing it as being strictly about money. Yes, money is a part of the picture, since the question asked of Jesus has to do with taxes being paid. But for me, there is a deeper and more important aspect to the story. It is about more than money. It is about allegiance—our loyalty and our devotion and our service. As Christians, followers of Jesus Christ as our Savior and Lord, will our ultimate allegiance be to the government or will it be to God?

I think one of the reasons we have fallen into the trap of focusing so much of our attention on the government as compared to the attention we give to the church is that over the years, little by little, we have passed along to the government much of what we, as the church, once did for our society and should still be doing. Think about it. At one time in our nation's history it was the church that primarily was responsible for higher education. It was the church that led the way in providing affordable health care to individuals. It was the church that felt responsible for welfare programs for the poor. It was

the church that insisted on civil rights for all our citizens. The church was the social conscience of our country, making sure that our society operated in a just and fair manner.

But over time we relinquished those values and those causes to the federal government, and when we did, we allowed them to become politicized to the extent that now, instead of agreeing on them, we have bitter debates about them. There was a time in our not-so-distant past when the church was on the same page with regard to these issues. The church as a whole felt it was our calling and obligation to meet these social needs with compassion. Not so much now. Much of what we used to give to God in order to show our concern for our brothers and sisters, we now give to the government, and for some reason I really can't quite understand, that has greatly lessened our level of commitment to the church. Perhaps that is a part of what Jesus is warning of here in this passage.

As I said earlier, we preachers are guilty of wanting to make this text all about money, and we do so by moving rather quickly through the first portion of the passage in order to get to the part about giving to the emperor versus giving to God. But look at the first few verses of the text, if you will. The Pharisees, in typical fashion, are looking for a way to trap Jesus. It is interesting that they have brought the Herodians along with them to participate in their gamesmanship, since

the Pharisees and Herodians were pretty much sworn enemies of each other. It is funny how politics make strange bedfellows. Both groups, however, much as they disagreed, found a common enemy in Jesus, who had a way of threatening them both.

Notice what they say to Jesus. I believe this is critically important for us to see. They state, "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." This is what they claim to know about Jesus. Now we might regard these words as empty flattery, somewhat like the kind of thing Eddie Haskell might have said to Beaver's mother. "I just love the pearls you are wearing today as you vacuum the house, Mrs. Cleaver. They really set off your tailored dress nicely. That's a most attractive look for you."

But I choose not to see it that way. I want to believe that as much as the Pharisees and Herodians dislike Jesus, they respect him, because they realize that he is a man of character, a person of integrity, one who honestly speaks for God and who regards all people as being essentially equal in God's eyes. He is, in their words, a gifted teacher who is sincere, who is truthful, and who is impartial. Sincere, truthful, and impartial. That is who they have come to know Jesus to be.

Now let's be honest. Can those things be said about many if not most politicians today? I don't think so. I think if you were listing characteristics of our current elected national officials—across the political spectrum and regardless of party affiliation—these particular attributes would not be high on the list. For some of our political representatives, maybe, but not for the majority. Are politicians these days sincere, truthful, and impartial? Doubtful.

To be sincere is to be genuine. It is to be free of hypocrisy. It is say what you mean and mean what you say. It also is really to care about the people you are supposed to be serving. To be truthful is to be committed to what actually is fact more than to how the facts can be spun to further your appearance or agenda. To be truthful is to be honest, even if that means admitting when you've been wrong or made a mistake or changed your opinion. To be impartial means to be equally concerned about everyone, not just your constituency, not just your political base, and not just your biggest campaign donors.

There is a reason why the poll ratings for congress are at an all-time low. Government in general is seen to be dysfunctional and broken. Washington is no longer trusted to do what is in the best interest of the country. I, for one, don't think that is such a bad thing from a biblical and theological point of view. I think it is a reminder of the truth of this particular passage of scripture we are looking at this

morning. Where are we to go for sincerity, for truth, and for impartiality? The government? No.

We are to find these things only in God. Only in God as revealed in Christ. Only God is sincere, the essence of integrity. Only God's way is the truth that leads to authentic life and genuine community. Only God is impartial toward people, respecting the value and worth of each and every individual. Such cannot be said of the government, especially these days. I wish it were different. Unfortunately, the state of the government today is reflected less in Frank Capra's classic film, *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*, and more in George Clooney's current movie, *The Ides of March*.

I believe with all my heart that the role of the church in our society is even more critical today than ever in our nation's history. This is where we study scripture in the kind of depth we need to in order to understand the nature and character of God and who God intends for us to be as individuals and as a society. This is where we learn what it means to be sincere, to have integrity, and to care genuinely for others and not just for ourselves. This is where we learn what ultimately is true because it is God's truth and not just conventional wisdom, popular slogans, and well-crafted sound bites. This is where we learn what it means to be really impartial, to be concerned for all people, no matter who they are, where they are from,

and what they have done. This is where we learn to live with each other by being sincere and truthful and impartial.

I want to believe that our country once lived by these principals and became great because of it. I want to believe that these principals formed the basis of what we refer to as American exceptionalism. I want to believe that when we attempted to live by these principals, we genuinely were much closer to being the Christian nation we still want to claim we are today. May that be true for us once again as we give responsibly to the government what we owe to it and give to God reverently what we owe to him and recognize the important difference between the two.