

Rev. George Arceneaux

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Pentecost 21

As I came into the Gospel reading this week, I remembered the words of the Swedish philosopher Anni Frig Lyngstad, "I work all night, I work all day, to pay the bills I have to pay. Ain't it sad? And still, there never seems to be a single penny left for me. That's too bad. Money, Money, Money, must be funny in a rich man's world."

So as I held these lyrics and the question of how I could potentially convince Richard and the choir to sing Abba, I've been reflecting on the gospel so famous for that phrase, "render unto caesar's what is caesar's" which has had some of the most interpretive gymnastics performed around it in order to say "this is why we need to pay taxes" or "this is why we shouldn't pay taxes" or to divine all manner of economic advice from the Son of God.

Christians have been interpreting this story for thousands of years, using the story to justify radically different practices and I can't help but feel... I and so many others have fallen for the trap that these authorities set for Jesus to which he most spectacularly responds.

The question the Pharisees and Herodians ask is, "is it lawful, [that is scripturally lawful] to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?" Again, Christians so often interpret this story and revert back to that question of these jerks rather than hear Jesus' response that busts that question wide open and focusses back not on matters of ideology or belief but on practical love.

I don't think I'm saying anything new when I say, we people are so prone to oversimplification, we want a side to root for and a side to root against, we want to be conservative and root against liberals, we want to be Christians and root against atheists, we want to love the bears and hate the packers. But if we really are willing to grapple with the reality of people and our relationships with others, our lives can't adhere to such simplistic views. Especially that last one I mentioned, because it's really hard to love the Bears these days.

The Pharisees ask a question that is devised to be answered one way or another that Jesus either side with the Roman Empire seemingly betray his religious roots or places him immediately as a harmful radical against the Romans, they mean to pit him against either Jew or gentile. Yet Jesus refuses as he says render unto Caesar what is Caesar's and unto God what is God's. In Jesus' response, I hear him basically responding by saying, "look, guys, quite messing around. There are people hurting and God is calling us to help."

Jesus isn't interested in living into a world of binaries, of us vs them, of distancing ourselves from others because by either making ourselves out to be better than others or pinning all of the world's problems on others. Jesus recognizes that we all live in a world where we face compromise and broken choices. Where we may work for companies or corporations which conflict with our values because we NEED to make a living to support our family, where we buy clothing that was created in environments with no

workers' rights or yes, where we pay taxes for governments which don't always reflect what we wish they were doing. And in such broken situations, where sin has infected a world where difficult and complex choices where it is so much easier to respond with simplicity, Christ says do what you gotta do. I mean, Jesus is literally saying, "yeah, these are the guys who are eventually going to crucify me, but yes pay taxes." And I earnestly believe Jesus says what he does, because he never wants us to forget that God knows we are moving through this broken world with our broken selves. And God wants us to remember that just as we pay taxes, as we worry about bills, as we fear how to get our kids into a good school, or how we'll pay for a medical procedure, or get a job that pays us enough, as we pay what this hard world demands that we owe, that just as we face such hardship ourselves, Jesus did too. Paid what this world demanded to the point he gave his life on the cross that death would be satisfied. God wants us to know our brokenness is seen, that God experiences it too, and to know that these demands cannot take that which God has put in us which cannot be extinguished. The good that calls us each to love one another and help us each face this broken world together, a good as powerful as the resurrection.

We'll all be tempted to act the way the world wants us to. To engage in all the great debates our media and society push us to debate in entrenched camps where we can be neatly sorted, just as those Pharisees sought to trap Jesus on one side of an argument against another. But I encourage you not to fall for it. Not to side with anything to the point that you can no longer see the people over on the other side. Render unto Caesar what is caesar's, move through this difficult world as you need to, and remember that everyone is trying to do that too. And render unto God what is God's, return the love that is in you to the body of Christ witnessed in your neighbor by loving them.