

“The Power of Power”

I had planned a somewhat different sermon for this morning than what you are about to receive. As I noted in this month’s newsletter, my theme was to be: *“Jesus teaches us to recognize and honor worldly power, but to realize that all of life comes from God.”*

But then I ran across something on Tuesday while surfing the internet that caught me and held me. After reading this week's Gospel lesson from St. Matthew, I was pointed to Bob Dylan's song, "Gonna Serve Somebody," and it kept echoing in my head:

*You may be an ambassador to England or France,
You may like to gamble, you might like to dance,
You may be the heavyweight champion of the world,
You may be a socialite with a long string of pearls.
But you're gonna have to serve somebody, yes indeed,
You're gonna have to serve somebody.
It may be the devil or it may be the Lord,
But you're gonna have to serve somebody.*

"Gonna Serve Somebody" was the lead song on Dylan's 1979 album "Slow Train Coming" and was his last hit single (Copyright © 1979 by Special Rider Music). It won the Grammy Award for best male rock vocal for 1979. This song also marked Bob Dylan's conversion to Christianity from Judaism. "You're gonna have to serve somebody," wrote Dylan and he now knew who he would be serving, "the Lord," Jesus Christ.

I thought of this song as I studied this Gospel lesson from St. Matthew, a text which includes Jesus' oft-quoted words, in response to the trick question from the Pharisees and the Herodians, ***“Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor or not?”***— ***“Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's.”***

Like all the recent texts we have been hearing from St. Matthew's Gospel, this one needs a lot of context and background explanation. Jews in first century Palestine paid a lot of taxes. There was a temple tax; there were also land taxes, customs and trade taxes to name just three more. The tax in this text was additional tax, one particularly despised by the Jews — it was called the Imperial Tax, required as a tribute to Rome to support the Roman Empire's occupation of Israel. Think about that for a moment: first century Jews were required to pay their oppressors a yearly tax to support their own oppression!

Of course, not everyone saw the tax that way. The Herodians were local sympathizers with the Roman rulers. We don't hear a lot from or about them in the Gospels; they were a family political party related to King Herod (you've heard that name, especially around the birth narratives), the local puppet ruler supported by the Romans. The Herodians supported the Imperial Tax, because they benefitted from it.

The Pharisees, also a political party as well as religious scholars, did not have much use for the Imperial Tax, but they grudgingly supported it since it also helped keep them in power. As far as Matthew was concerned, the Pharisees would do just about anything to try to trap Jesus.

The Imperial Tax was opposed by the most, if not all, of Jesus' followers. Many of them were nationalists who found the Imperial Tax particularly offensive since it daily reminded them of their humiliation and occupation by the Roman Empire.

Now, the Imperial Tax should have been a problem for the Pharisees, too, and not only for political reasons. A coin engraved with a picture of the Emperor Caesar Tiberius and a proclamation of his divinity? — why, that broke the first two commandments! Thus, in Jesus' time, any conversation about the Imperial Tax was very divisive and immediately revealed where one stood in relation to Rome and faith.

This is why and how the Herodians and Pharisees got together to try to trap Jesus. Normally, they did not get along, but on this occasion, they

were united in their desire to trap Jesus. Recall with me that Jesus had that week entered Jerusalem, and, as we know from the voice of the crowds that day, the people loved him. Now, Jesus was preaching in the Temple and stirring up all kinds of trouble for these status-quo folks. So, together, the Herodians and Pharisees decided to try to trap Jesus.

With their question about the Imperial Tax, they thought they had Jesus boxed in: If Jesus answered one way, if he advocated paying this tax, he would certainly disappoint his followers. If Jesus answered another way, if he advocated not paying this tax, they would see to it that he would be in trouble with the Roman rulers. They thought they had him!

But we know, Jesus not only evaded their trap, he trapped them in their own question. ***"Whose head is this [on the coin]?"*** Jesus asked. Perhaps over-eager to advance their own plot, Jesus' opponents forgot that by showing a coin with the Emperor's image on it, they had actually betrayed their own complicity with the Roman system. Then Jesus asked whose title, that is whose proclamation, adorned the coin. ***"The Emperor's,"*** they answered. Everyone in attendance knew the two commandments and they knew that Jesus had just trapped the trappers in their own blasphemy according to Jewish law!

That makes Jesus' response even more biting: ***"Give, therefore, to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's."*** Jesus turned the tables, so to speak, on his questioners. With just a few words, Jesus revealed the truth about his would-be accusers and simultaneously called them to a higher accountability and fidelity than they had imagined possible.

That's where Bob Dylan's song comes in — you're gonna serve somebody. Jesus made it absolutely clear whom he served.

Might Jesus also be talking to us? He is not looking to trap us, but Jesus is inviting us to declare our allegiance to God. Thus, perhaps the key question here is not whose image is on the coin but rather whose image is on us! Whose image is on our hearts? Jesus is inviting us to declare our

undivided allegiance to God.

Often, this text is interpreted to present the dichotomy in our lives, that we have duties to both God and country. While that may be so, I believe Jesus is talking here primarily about our duty to God. Many of us have strong political views, perhaps more divisibly so this election year than any other (at least in my recent memory): we may be Democrats, Republicans, or Independents (are there any of those left?). But, before and above any of these, we — you and I — are Christians, followers of Jesus Christ.

Jesus is or should be our first loyalty, above all others.

Jesus raises important questions for us in this text and he does not give pat answers. There are elements in our lives that are, indeed, part of the world order and should be *“given to the emperor,”* as the text states. But there are other parts of our lives, our very persons and our very selves, that belong to God alone. If we remember that, all of life can take on greater focus and meaning. We belong not to anything this world — we belong to God.

This means that, no matter what we may do or say, no matter where we may go, no matter what may happen to us, we are first and foremost and forever God's own beloved children. If we believe this and live this, God will shape all that we say and do and how we live. We belong to God. We are God's beloved children.

There is tremendous resource in recognizing that. But it goes well beyond recognizing it. In a bit we will speak together the Nicene Creed. In essence, two things will be going on as we do that: 1) We will remind ourselves of the content of our faith; 2) At the same time we will announce once again to one another that this faith binds us to each other. In our current situation where safety demands of us that some are within the building while others seek to feel safe in their cars, it is critical that we make this joint declaration of mutual support.

Perhaps even more important than either or both of those objectives is

that we realize that “creed” comes from the Latin credo. We casually translate this as “*I believe*,” as if to say “*I agree that this is true*.” If that were all there is to it, we’d have to talk about the “Nicene Opinion,” from the Latin opinio, “I think this is so.” It goes much deeper than that; credo means “*I give my life to...*”

So we wind up back at Bob Dylan

*But you're gonna have to serve somebody, yes indeed,
You're gonna have to serve somebody.
It may be the devil or it may be the Lord,
But you're gonna have to serve somebody.*

Something, or better someone, is going to lay claim on who you are. You're gonna have to serve somebody. We must know whom we serve. All of life is God's. Jesus tells us that we are to ***"Give to God the things that are God's."*** Since all of life is God's and since you're gonna serve somebody, we — you and I — we serve and love and live in the love and rule of Jesus Christ. We belong to God. We are God's children. Our task is to believe that and live it.

You're gonna have to serve somebody.

Amen.