

How do we know what to render and unto whom? Our Gospel reading this morning is one of the times Jesus mentions money. And all of us have just received in the mail our letter from the Stewardship chairman, Tom, and the opening of our fall fundraising season. This is an important time in the year for us as we try to sort out individually what we render unto Caesar and what we will render unto God...and to God's church.

In our Gospel reading this morning we have the Pharisees in cahoots with the Herodians as they attempt to entrap Jesus. They wanted to show him to all the people to be just a troublemaker. They were out to catch Jesus in a very serious game of "gotcha." They ask if it's lawful to pay taxes. What they mean is it lawful under the Jewish law – Torah. If Jesus says yes, then he's ignoring the Torah law forbidding Jews to put anything ahead of God in importance. And if he says no, then he's going to get the people in trouble because they would be punished for not paying the tax. What Jesus says to them is, "Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites."

Although this is a sometimes touchy subject for us, it was not for Jesus, or for Martin Luther for that matter. He is a major focus of our thoughts this month as we approach the 500th anniversary of his posting of the 95 theses on the door of the Church in Wittenberg. That happened on October 31st 1517. Luther wasn't afraid to bring up the subject of money because he felt that the Roman Church was taking advantage of the faithful by asking them to pay indulgences to assure them that their relatives would escape purgatory, and worse, the fires of hell.

the Roman Church had begun building St. Peter's Basilica in Rome in 1506. They needed money, and lots of it, and so were selling indulgences to aid in raising that capital. That was just one of the things that Luther disagreed about with the Bishop of Rome.

Luther was very interested in the text from the Gospel of Matthew that we have before us today. He had it in mind as he crafted those 95 theses about the excesses of the Roman Church. He imagined what Jesus would have thought of the Church of God in the year 1517.

And the people of Germany did not just have to cope with the demands of the church. They had to consider the demands of the Princes of the provinces in which they lived. At the time of Luther's posting of those very controversial theses the prince who ruled Germany was John, Duke of Saxony.

Luther wrote a long treatise in 1523, six years after the famous 95 theses, dedicated to the prince entitled *Secular Authority: To what extent it should be Obeyed*. Luther was not a man to be cowed by anyone. He wrote:

Formerly I addressed a booklet to the German nobility setting forth their Christian duties. But how they have carried out my suggestions is very plain to see. Hence I must change my tactics and write to them, this time, what they should omit and not do. I fear this writing will have

just as little effect on them as the former one had, they will by all means remain princes and by no means become Christians. ⁱ

He goes on and on and on for many pages. I wonder if Prince John, to whom it was dedicated, could actually get through the whole thing! Eventually, Luther comes to the mention of our Gospel reading for today.

He says:

Christ himself made this nice distinction [between things human and things divine] and said summed it all up briefly when he said ‘Give unto Caesar the things that are Caesar’s and unto God the things that are God’s.’ If then, imperial power extended to God’s kingdom and power and were not something by itself, he would not thus have made it a separate thing. For as was said, the soul is not under Caesar’s power; he can neither teach nor guide it, neither kill it nor keep it alive, neither bind it nor loose it, neither judge it nor condemn it, neither hold it, nor release it, which he must do had he power to command it and impose laws upon it; but over life, goods and honor he indeed has this right, for such things are under his authority.ⁱⁱ

Many of the parables that Jesus tells, and ones we have heard over the last couple of weeks have been directly aimed at the people who were supposed to care for the spiritual lives of their people – the scribes and Pharisees, and the priests of the temple. We heard the parable of the wicked tenants, and the parable of the king who gives a feast. In both cases, the stories show how the church leaders are more interested in their own power than the lives of the people that they should be caring for.

That was exactly what Luther was upset about in the church in his day. He says,

A man who neither knows or preaches the Gospel is not a priest or a bishop but only a kind of nuisance to the church. Under the false title of priest or bishop, or dressed in sheep’s clothing, he does violence to the Gospel and acts as a wolf in the church ...They are ignorant of the duties and unable to fulfill them. Let them deplore their pitiable lot, appropriate to their hypocrisy with prayers and tears. Otherwise, of a truth, they will be the sons of eternal perdition.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Luther, and of course Jesus, didn’t want powerful people to take advantage of the rest of humanity. And that is the message of the Gospel reading today. And at the same time God expects all of us to take care of each other and take care of the things that are important to us; our families, our friends, our fellow parishioners, and our church.

Rachel Lamb has taken the time to form a plan for all of us to be good stewards of each other. I would ask you to have a look at the sign up sheet that is up on the bulletin board to see how you can help another parishioner or neighbor. We have all done this informally, and now would be a good time to formally say that you are willing to visit, or drive, or cook for someone who needs some help.

Over the next couple of weeks you'll be hearing from some of your fellow parishioners about our financial stewardship of this building and our many ministries here. Please prayerfully consider that we cannot do all the things we do here if we do not heat the building, plow the snow and pay the salaries of those who we employ.

Remembering today what Paul said to the church in Thessalonica:

I give thanks for all of you constantly remembering before our God and Father the work of faith, and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.

ⁱⁱⁱ Martin Luther; selections from his writings, John Dillinberger, editor , 1962, pg. 365.

ⁱⁱ Ibid. pg. 387.

ⁱ Ibid. pg. 349.