

Sermon for the 29th Sunday in Ordinary Time
October 19, 2008

Scriptures: Exodus 33:12-33
Matthew 22:15-22

“Render Unto God”

It was a trap that the Pharisees were attempting to spring on Jesus, but Jesus demonstrated the reality that they themselves were caught in a trap revealed by their question: “Is it lawful?”

Shortly after being called to my first church, I was visited by the pastor of my home Presbyterian congregation, Paul Musser. I showed him around the small village church, told him about the congregation, and proudly informed him that the members of this small West Virginian congregation were excellent givers – they gave an amount per member equal to the average giving of US Presbyterians. I thought that was pretty good. (Just for comparison’s sake in 2005 the average Presbyterian member gave \$984.00. The average member at Flemington Pres gave \$635.00). I felt that for small town West Virginia Presbyterians to be matching the average across the US was great; these were not wealthy people by any means. I will never forget Paul Musser’s response, “Why should you be pleased with average?”

“Is it lawful?” “Is that the best we can do?” Jesus responds. “Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar’s.” Here is the coin with Caesar’s face, pay what you owe. But, “Render unto God the things that are God’s.” That is about much more than what is lawful. That is about receiving all the grace and all the benefit God desires you to have. If we are going to be satisfied with just doing what is lawful, just doing the conventional, that hardly seems

worth Jesus dying for. Is that all Jesus' suffering and death secured for us?

Jesus offers us a relationship with God that offers us something sublime. Not so much otherworldly as transformative of all that it means to be human, so that our humanity takes on all the glory God originally intended. Jesus offers us a much greater faithfulness than simply what is lawful; Jesus offers us a much grander potential than being average; Jesus offers us a much more glorious life than just getting by. "Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's, but render unto God the things that are God's."

As a congregation we are in a period of significant reflection about our future. This past Monday evening as all our committees met, Christian Ed and Worship spent an hour meeting together. They are beginning to ask questions and dialogue together about what directions they should be leading you regarding study and worship. They are weighing questions about the depth of our spirituality, about the extent to which we can encourage growth both in worship experience and in learning and understanding the faith.

There are things we have to render to Caesar in that decision process – things such as schedules and budgets and the activities that beckon to us beyond the confines of congregational life. But should we be satisfied with simply rendering to Caesar? Those two committees are attempting to sort through significant decisions about how we avoid just rendering unto Caesar, and begin to consider more carefully how we can most faithfully and most opportunistically render to God the things that are God's, so that we are more than just conventional, average, legal.

You will have opportunity to lift your voices in this conversation. On Saturday, November 15, the Associate Executive Presbyter of New Brunswick Presbytery, Greg Albert, will be with us all day to lead the congregation through a time of discernment and planning

as we make final preparations to provide the soon to be elected PNC with guidance for their search for a new pastor. All of you and all other of our members and committed friends are invited to spend that Saturday here, working together to think about the ways in which we render to God the things that are God's. I hope you will be here.

The Stewardship Committee also was at work Monday evening. They have embarked on a Stewardship journey, have invited the Session to join them on that journey, to which the Session has responded positively, and now they seek to effectively call you to that journey. It is a journey of moving beyond getting by with our stewardship, focusing mainly on rendering to Caesar, doing what is legal, meeting budgets. It is a journey to a much greater depth of rendering to God the things that are God's.

We are in the midst of a time of significant economic distress. There is much talk about Wall Street and Main Street, which is probably a false dichotomy. We are all in this mess together, and we are all infected by the assumption that money matters almost beyond any other consideration. "It's the economy, stupid!"

Now I realize that some of you have been significantly impacted in negative ways by the current economic distress, and I don't mean to in any way diminish or disregard your situation, and most certainly God is not indifferent to your need. I hope that any of you whose well being is significantly placed in jeopardy during this time will keep your church family informed and will allow us to pray for you, to encourage, and to care for you.

But for most of us, this time of uncertainty and anxiety is really an opportunity for spiritual growth. Can money really define us in any adequate way? Can rendering unto Caesar alone really provide us with the best possible life? And if not, how are we going to wean ourselves from the assumption that is so widespread

around us filtering into every aspect of our culture that money and the stuff it can buy is the be all and end all?

It really must be a weaning process. We won't go from bondage to that philosophy, to a fully realized spiritual freedom in an instant. It is a journey; it's a process. It begins with a step. It begins with acknowledging the call to render unto God the things that are God's, and to see that call as much more of an opportunity than a demand.

Well, what does that mean with regard to our money? The biblical way of talking about rendering unto God in the arena of our money is tithing. Giving to God one tenth of what we earn or gather. It is a call for a disciplined lifestyle that off the top, at the beginning of our decision making about money, acknowledges God's sovereignty, God's right, God's preeminence among that which gives our life meaning.

Most of us have a long way to go from reaching in our wallets on Sunday morning and finding a convenient bill to toss in the offering plate, to this kind of disciplined and worshipful lifestyle. How do we get from where we are to that desirable place?

We begin by acknowledging that God has a better place for us. We set a goal of coming to that place, in this case giving a tithe, a tenth of what our labors and investments provide us. We covenant with God and with each other to move toward that goal by faithfully increasing the percent of our income we give by one percent of our income each year until we get to our goal.

The Stewardship Committee has embraced that journey, Session has embraced that journey, and now it is your turn to prayerfully consider the opportunity such a journey offers you. Shall we be content with rendering unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's, or shall we plumb the depths of what it means to render unto God the

things that are God's, so that we might reap **ALL** the benefits of this great salvation offered to us in Jesus Christ?

Is it the economy, stupid, or have we found something much more joyous, much more gracious, much more loving, much more hopeful? Have you found that greater life? Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's, but render unto God the things that are God's.