

Sermons at
First Lutheran Church (ELCA)
Reggie Denton, Pastor

October 18, 2020 (Proper 24, Year A)
Matthew 22:15-22

On the outskirts of a small town, there was a big old pecan tree by a cemetery fence. One day, two boys gathered up a bucketful of those pecans, sat down behind the tree, and began dividing the nuts.

"One for you, one for me; one for you, one for me," they said.

In their excitement, several of the nuts were dropped and rolled down by the fence.

Soon another boy came along the road riding on his bicycle. As he passed, he thought he heard voices from inside the cemetery. He slowed down to investigate. Sure enough, he heard, "One for you, one for me; one for you; one for me."

Now, coming from inside a cemetery, he just KNEW what it was. "Oh my," he shuddered, "it's the Lord and Satan dividing the souls at the cemetery."

He jumped back on his bike and rode off. Just around the bend he met an old man with a cane, hobbling along. "Come here quick," said the boy, "you won't believe what I heard. The Lord and Satan are down at the cemetery dividing up the souls."

The man said, "Leave me alone, kid, can't you see it's hard for me to walk."

When the boy insisted, though, the man hobbled to the cemetery. Standing by the fence they heard, "One for you, one for me; one for you, one for me."

The old man whispered, "Boy, you've been tellin' the truth. Let's see if we can SEE the Lord."

Shaking with fear, they peered through the fence, but still couldn't see anything. The old man and the boy gripped the wrought iron bars of the fence tighter and tighter as they tried to get a glimpse of the Lord.

And then they heard this: "One for you, and one last one for me. That's all. Now let's go get those nuts by the fence."

They say the old man made it back to town 5 minutes BEFORE the boy did.

In 1789, Benjamin Franklin wrote in a letter to a friend, and coined the phrase, "In this world nothing is certain but death and taxes." It's a hard, cold reality. And they both drive us...well, nuts.

In our gospel Jesus was asked about one of those realities. The Pharisees and the Herodians, two groups of people that didn't like each other very much, get together and ask, "Jesus, what do you think? Is it LAWFUL to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?"

Now you might ask, "Why WOULD it be against God's law to pay taxes? Why would God CARE?" Well, there's something you should KNOW about Roman coins. Besides the image of Caesar, there was an inscription proclaiming him to be a god and the SON of a god. It was a graven image to a false god, , breaking the first AND the second commandments, so, for BOTH Christians and Jews, it was blasphemy to even HAVE one of those coins, much less have it INSIDE the LORD'S HOLY TEMPLE.

The Pharisees were like those Capital One credit card commercials saying, "What's in YOUR wallet?" But for Jesus, the issue was something much BIGGER than that. He wasn't concerned with what we have in our WALLETS; he's concerned with what's in our HEARTS. What do we TRUST? Do we trust our money? Or do we trust God?

In essence Jesus said, "Give Caesar what he has coming, a silver coin with HIS IMAGE on it. It's HIS ANYWAY, so let him have it BACK. But give back to GOD all that GOD deserves.

We KNOW what belongs to Caesar, because it has his IMAGE on it!

How do we know what belongs to GOD? Well, it has GOD'S image on it! And according to the book of Genesis, in the very FIRST CHAPTER of the Bible, that's US. WE were CREATED in GOD'S image, according to God's OWN likeness.

Jesus says, "Give therefore to GOD the things that ARE God's." WHAT are we to give to God? The things STAMPED with God's image – US! We are to give God OURSELVES – not just 10% of our income, not just our time, talents and treasures, but OURSELVES – our WHOLE being – not just some PART of us. So EVERYTHING, every last breath, every last hair on our heads, every last beat of our hearts, belongs to GOD. Everything we ARE, and everything we HAVE, BELONGS to GOD. And we are called to give it ALL BACK to God.

The Pharisees ask about what they have in their POCKETS, but JESUS is MORE concerned with what's in our HEARTS. Caesar can HAVE the idols, the hypocrisy, the hatred and the hostility; EVERYTHING that MATTERS belongs to GOD. Everything!

Who do you TRUST? Thankfully we have in OUR pockets something to remind us.
(Show a picture of a penny.)

This motto "IN GOD WE TRUST" was placed on all U.S. coins for a reason. According to the website for the Department of the Treasury, during the Civil War the Treasury received countless letters from people throughout the country, urging that the United States recognize God on our coins.

As a result, Secretary Salmon P. Chase instructed the Director of the Mint to prepare a motto. In a letter dated November 20, 1861, he wrote:

Dear Sir: No nation can be strong except in the strength of God, or safe except in His defense. The trust of our people in God should be declared on our national coins.

So, EACH coin is a reminder to us. I read about a wealthy man who STILL picks up EVERY penny he finds, and smiles as he reads those words, "In God We Trust." He says, "And IF I trust in God, the name of God is holy, even on a COIN. It's written on every single United States coin, but we never seem to notice it! God drops a message right in front of me telling me to trust Him? Who am I to pass it by? When I see a coin, I pray, I stop to see if my trust IS in God at that MOMENT. I pick the coin up as a response to God; that I DO trust in Him. And for a short time, at least, I cherish it. I think it's God's way of starting a conversation with me. Lucky for me, God is patient and pennies are plentiful!"

What do you trust? Do you trust what's in your wallet? Or do you trust God?

The members of First Lutheran have shown again and again that we have God in our hearts. Every time a need has arisen, you have filled it to the glory of God. When we needed MORE space and to IMPROVE our space, you built it. And look at this place. You showed that you have God in your heart. And the things we do here – every time we worship, every time we study God's word, every time we visit someone, every time we teach our children to show them God's ways, every time we gather food or make a meal for the hungry, or make a quilt for the poor, or make a prayer shawl for the suffering – every time we DO the things God has CALLED this church to do and BE in this community, you SHOW that you have God in your heart. You are STAMPED with GOD'S IMAGE, and you BELONG to HIM.

What do you TRUST? Do you trust what's in your WALLET? Or do you trust GOD? It may not be the question we want (it may even make us a little "nuts") but according to Jesus, it's the question that MATTERS. Who owns your HEART? Amen.