

Sermon for the 18th Sunday after Pentecost

October 16th, 2011

Sermon Text: Matthew 22:15-22

Sermon Title: How Much Do We Owe?

Grace, mercy and peace from our risen Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

You sit around the table with a few friends enjoying brunch or dinner. Perhaps you're at Pal Joey's with your family enjoying the pizza. The food is good, the conversation even better and before you know it, two hours have gone by and it's time to head home. The waitress brings the bill and everyone begins to pull out wallets or purses and ask, "How much do we owe?" We are all familiar with the scene - we've all been there. We may even be there an hour or two from now for brunch.

However the bill gets divided, split equally between all parties, or by exact sums based on who ordered what, there is little doubt that it will get paid. Even if someone comes up a bit short, it's okay – they can make it up later, there will be plenty of chances to pay it back. We are used to paying for what we owe and we really don't like to be in debt. Now, I realize that we need to take out a loan to purchase some things, houses, cars and the like – but we work to pay those debts off. In fact we take pride in carrying our own weight and we really don't like to owe anything to anybody.

Our Gospel reading for today also talks about paying off debts. It talks about two very different types of debt though. The debts we owe here on earth, and more importantly, the debt we owe to God. And unlike the bill for dinner, we may not be so quick to pull out our wallets and ask, "How much do we owe?"

Jesus says in verse 21. *“Therefore render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s”*

This brief exchange between Jesus, the Pharisees and others, took place during that final, busy week in Jerusalem, the week leading up to Jesus’ death on the cross.

The whole city was buzzing. Just a day or two earlier, crowds had flocked to Jesus with palms, welcoming him with Hosannas and shouts of “Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.” Then he had the nerve to kick the buyers and sellers out of the temple and actually begin to heal the unwanted; the sick, the blind and the lame. It was too much for the religious and political leaders of the city. He was turning their world upside down and he was telling stories, or parables, that were obviously directed at them

This Jesus had to be stopped. So they sought to arrest him and put an end to it all. But they had to play their cards just right. The people seemed to like this prophet from Nazareth and it would not be wise to upset them. That would only cause more unrest, and the leaders of the city just wanted to erase this Jesus and have things go back to the way “they were.”

What they needed was a plan – a fool proof trap that would trip this rabble rouser up in his own words – a scheme that would force him to condemn himself, keep them clean and allow things to get back to normal.

So they came up with a word game. A trick in which there was no correct answer. It’s not too dissimilar to the old joke where an innocent man is asked, “Answer “yes” or “no.” Did you stop kicking on your dog this morning?” If the man answers “yes,” he openly admits that he had been kicking the dog, if he answers “no,” he admits that he is still kicking the poor dog. It’s a no win

situation.

The chief priests and scribes trick worked like this, they would have some spies ask Jesus if it was lawful to pay taxes to Caesar. If Jesus said “yes,” they knew it would anger all his Jewish followers who despised paying tribute to the hated Roman government. But, if he said “no” to paying the tax, the plotters could charge him with tax evasion, arrest him and turn him over to Pilate right there. They were certain that they had him.

But we’ve heard this story before and we know how it turns out. When asked, Jesus has them to look at a coin. *“Whose likeness and inscription is this?”* he asks. *“Caesar’s.”* is the reply. *“Therefore render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s.”*

With that brief answer, Jesus literally shuts them up. *“And they were not able in the presence of the people to catch him in what he said, but marveling at his answer they became silent”* is how it reads in Luke’s version of the story.

The Son of God did not avoid the question put to him, but answered it a way they weren’t expecting. He answered the question, but gave them something more to think about. Jesus is like that.

With his brief answer, Christ clearly distinguishes between the two kingdoms under which all believers live, the earthly, or civil kingdom and the heavenly kingdom. His answer applied to those in Jerusalem 2000 years ago, and it applies to us today.

Our first allegiance is always to God and to the heavenly kingdom, that’s made clear in Acts chapter 5. *“But Peter and the apostles answered, “We must obey God rather than men.”* But we are also bound to obey the legitimate civil government and authorities that God has established. Romans 13. *“Let every*

*person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God” and “For because of this you also pay taxes, for the authorities are ministers of God, attending to this very thing. Pay to all what is owed to them: taxes to whom taxes are owed, revenue to whom revenue is owed, respect to whom respect is owed, honor to whom honor is owed.”*

Jesus’ answer to the spies of the chief priests and elders was, of course, right on the money, no pun intended. As Christians, we continue to live as both earthly and heavenly creatures. Here on earth we respect our governing officials, as the Bible teaches, and we pay our taxes to support the institutions that keep us safe. Certainly here in the United States, where we are blessed with so many freedoms and opportunities, our taxes are a small price to pay. Now don’t get me wrong – we got our property tax bill too and we’re not what you would exactly call “happy,” but that doesn’t mean we won’t be paying it.

Quite honestly, the paying of taxes, the “rendering unto Caesar”, is not the most challenging portion of Jesus’ response today. We’re quite used to it. We don’t even need to ask, “How much do we owe?” Our government is more than happy to tell us. The city, county, state and federal authorities see to it that we are sent notices and official forms that regularly, and with great accuracy, tell us exactly how much we owe.

No, determining how much we must “render to Caesar” is not difficult. The real challenge comes in the second part of Jesus’ response, the “rendering to God” part.

So? How much do we owe?

How much do we owe our God?

Our hearts? Our lives? Our homes and families? Yes, and more.

The World we live in? The air we breathe, water we drink and food we eat? Yes, and more.

Our neighbors, friends, teachers, employers and protectors? The sun, the moon, the stars, the vastness of the universe and the depths of the oceans? Yes, all this... and more.

You see, all these things, all these wonderful gifts from God that are ours, will one day pass away. But He won't and we won't. We are God's very own. We are eternal heavenly creatures, created in His image.

If the coin of the Roman tax was stamped with Caesar's image, it belongs to Caesar. But we are stamped with the image of the Almighty. Created in His image Genesis tells us, and so we belong to Him.

What we owe our Heavenly Father, our Creator, is to be the heavenly creatures He designed us to be, to live our lives as He would have us live, perfectly and in accordance with His law, the Law given to Moses on the mountain.

Unfortunately, we cannot live up to the Law. *"For all have sinned and fall short of the Glory of God,"* Romans tells us. Because of our sin, we cannot live the perfect life our Father demands. We come up short. When this bill comes to the table, there is no amount of cash or credit that can pay the tab. And no, we can't even work it off. Nothing we may try to do on our own to pay off what we owe God can put a dent in our immense debt.

Now, in a restaurant, coming up short is not really that bad. Most places will give you an opportunity to make good, to come back and pay what you owe. The worst that will probably happen is that you will be tossed out on your ear and

asked to never eat there again. But to be tossed out of God's presence because of our sin, is to be tossed out of Eden itself, to be tossed out of eternity, never to eat at the Marriage Feast of the Lamb, and that is a truly frightening concept.

We owe too much, we can't begin to pay and there is nothing we can do. There is no bank, loan shark, bankruptcy lawyer or credit counselor who can help.

There is only Jesus.

It is because our heavenly Father doesn't want anyone to miss out on the Feast, it is because He doesn't want anyone tossed out of eternity, that He sent His Son Jesus to pick up the tab.

Because we can only come up short, no matter how much we try, Jesus comes and pays the bill in full. Only Jesus can "*render the things to God.*"

Jesus knew full well just how costly this rendering would be. To pay for the sin of the world, our Lord would pay with His life, He would pour out His blood on the cross and in doing so, fulfill all righteousness. He would allow himself to be beaten, humiliated and crucified, so that our debts could be erased. And He would rise again from that death to show Satan and the world that sin and death had been defeated once and for all.

Jesus paid the price for you, for me and even for our enemies. He picked up the tab so that we now can rejoice in our Baptismal grace! Through the outpouring of His blood, Christ made our sinful stains as white as snow. We can stand before our Heavenly Father as sinless heirs to His kingdom.

So, "How much do we owe?"

Well, since Christ picked up the tab for the sin of the world, we no longer owe anything when it comes to our salvation.

But just like when your Father or your friend picks up the tab for brunch, we can't help but express our thanks. It's why we're here today and every Sunday, to show our praise and give our thanksgiving to the one who paid the price. To give Him all glory, laud and honor – to sing “Holy God, we praise Thy name.”

And there is no better way to show our thanks than by gathering as His people, as His bride, the church. Because it is as His church where He continues to give us His gifts, to feed, nurture and forgive us. It is as His church where we receive His Holy Word and His sacraments, those foretastes of the eternal gifts waiting for us in Heaven.

How much do we owe? To Caesar or the government, you'll find out soon enough, just look in the mailbox, but to God? Well, because Christ paid off our debt in full, because He picked up the tab, we owe Him nothing but our eternal thanks and praise.

Now may the peace of God, which passes all human understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen