

**The Things that Are God's  
A Sermon by Louise Westfall  
Fairmount Presbyterian Church  
Cleveland Heights, Ohio  
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Text: Matthew 22:15-22**

The FBI's chief of counterterrorism is a no-nonsense, plain-spoken man nearing retirement after a distinguished public service career. Michael Rollince was speaking to us gathered Presbyterian clergy and lay leaders recently about homeland security strategies. He summarized the challenge this way: *How do we overcome the effectiveness of groups who want to destroy us when they're willing to sacrifice all?* Then he put the matter even more starkly: *We offer rewards for information—as much as 25 million U.S. dollars—against their religion's promise of heaven....and we lose every time.*

The demands of faith versus the enticements of culture. I was struck again by the single-minded commitment of some Islamic fundamentalists to their cause, such that no inducement of personal financial gain will deter them from putting it all on the line.

By contrast, Judeo-Christian stewardship seems so reasonable, so balanced with other claims on our lives and fortunes. Even the stewardship "gold standard"—the Biblical tithe—is proportional: we are invited to offer God 10% of our resources. Contemporary churches even acknowledge their members' contributions to charitable organizations and educational institutions as part of this obligation, so reduce the proportion even further, to 5%.

On first reading, the gospel text this morning reinforces the perception that faithful stewardship is determined by allocating one part of the whole for spiritual purpose. *Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's*, Jesus famously replied to the question about paying taxes posed to him by the religious leaders. But is it nice and neat?—sorting out what belongs to whom? Fulfilling our responsibilities as breadwinners of our families, citizens and disciples? What does God expect? Listen for God's Word to the church—and to each of us—in the reading found on page 24 of the New Testament portion of the chapel/pew Bibles. A reading from the gospel according to Matthew, in the twenty-second chapter, at the 15<sup>th</sup> verse. [22:15-22]

Four score and nine years ago, our forebears brought forth into this city a new congregation, conceived in God's love and dedicated to making a

difference in the world. Happy Birthday, Fairmount! Today is this congregation's 89<sup>th</sup> anniversary, marking almost nine decades in the Heights community, witnessing to God's presence and power in worship, education and service. [at 8:30: The dramatic stained-glass window][at 11: The oil lamp over the doorway] symbolizes the intent of our founding mothers that this church reflect the light of Christ in our homes and in the wider community, that we be a beacon of hope for others. I say "founding mothers" purposely, because it was a group of women who first banded together to provide Christian education for children that provided the impetus for Fairmount's chartering as a Presbyterian Church. Not only did these intrepid women start a Sunday Church School, they also raised funds for various charitable works, and became the forerunner of the Guild of Presbyterian Women, who began their 91<sup>st</sup> season a couple weeks ago. In anticipation of our congregation's 90<sup>th</sup> birthday in 2006, I am appointing a committee to help us celebrate our rich tradition and anticipate our centenary a decade from now.

Our annual stewardship campaign of which you heard elder Jim Dakin speak provides the bulk of what it takes financially to keep the lights on at Fairmount, both literally and as a symbol of our vibrant mission. While we are fortunate to have an endowment that currently stands around six million dollars from which we draw annually, by far the greatest indicator of our ability to fund programs, maintain this building, and hire staff comes from the money you, the current members, contribute. Consider the letter you'll receive this week as an invitation to send your church a birthday card, with many happy returns in the form of dollars you'll give over the next year. . . .

. . . .And consider today's Scripture text as a guide for making those gifts. Remember to *give God the things that are God's*, just as it says. Only you can determine what those things are, and how much they represent of your total resources. Except, when we look at the context of the passage, we see that it is not neutral, not a theoretical discussion of one's financial responsibility to the church. It's actually not a very nice passage to kick off a stewardship campaign, full as it is with challenge and testing.

In it the religious leaders provoke yet another occasion to discredit this popular teacher Jesus, to trip him up with his own words. Their question to him doesn't translate smoothly into our contemporary reality. Paying taxes to the ruler of the imperial government that had conquered and all but enslaved them was widely regarded as an act of unbearable capitulation to evil which jeopardized one's spiritual health. So if Jesus says "Yes. Pay the tax," he'll be revealed to the people as an imposter, a sell-out, a religious fraud. On the other hand, if he says, "No. Don't pay

the tax," he'll be arrested on the spot for treason. Either way, the religious leaders figure they will have successfully eliminated Jesus and the instability he was creating within the household of faith.

But Jesus sees through the clever ruse. He understands what they're up to, and knows that their question does not spring from a sincere desire to do the right thing. Fact is, they don't really care what his perspective on tithing is. Jesus knows this, and beats them at their own game. He avoids the trap they've set for him, responding not with an answer, but by creating a little scenario that leaves Jesus' detractors sputtering and slinking away.

*Show me the coin used for the tax.* That they are able to produce one at all is more than a little ironic, as it reveals the hypocrisy of those religious leaders. The coin bore the emperor's graven image, along with an inscription proclaiming him to be "Divine Son and Lord." What were they doing with an object that right off the bat broke two of the Ten Commandments? Even the hated Romans had accommodated to the sensitivity of their captured people by minting a number of nondescript coins that might be used to pay the tax. But there's more. *Whose head is this, and whose title?* And they respond on cue, *The emperor's.* Well then, Jesus finishes, *give to the emperor the things that are the emperor's...* Professor Doug Adams of Claremont School of Theology suggests that Jesus is having some fun with them, maybe even pocketing the coin as he adds, *...and give to God the things that are God's.* See, the issue isn't really about the legitimacy of paying taxes, or the necessity of paying God. It's about who or what is being served. Who or what claims first place in one's life. Jesus takes their question and turns it around to define the nature of the struggle. How do we figure out what are the things that belong to the emperor, and the things that are God's?

The coin of the realm bears the image of the emperor. But the people of the realm bear something else: the image of the Creator, the One to whom they really belong, first and last. Did they get it? Do we? That God is the Ruler of all. Everything! Everyone! *The earth is the Lord's and everything in it; the world and all the people who live in it* as the Psalmist put it. We don't own anything; our possessions, our stuff, the fruits of our hard work---all are gifts from God. Come to find out our "stewardship" is not about managing a proportion of those gifts, not about giving a percentage to God, but about how we use it all.

Which certainly can't be contained in an annual campaign. Giving to God the things that are God's requires the stewardship of all life. Not 5% or even 10%, but 100%. Friends, how can we ever imagine giving to God in proportion to what God has given us?

God's ultimate and exclusive claim eliminates the compartments we create in order to retain control over the bulk of our resources. Life is no longer to be divided into the "spiritual" and the "secular" as if God were not Ruler over both! Giving to God the things that are God's involves faithful action in the political realm, in the marketplace as well as in the sanctuary, at home and everywhere. It is the answer we get every time we pray the Lord's Prayer and ask that God's Kingdom come, God's will be done *on earth as in heaven*. That's the reason the Reformed theological tradition has always defined the scope of the church's mission to include the social and political as well as the spiritual. The good news concerns souls, but also minds and bodies and communities: the loving stewardship of all the gifts we have been given. That's why we teach Sunday School and build Habitat for Humanity homes. That's why we explore spirituality in small groups and join with the Northeast Ohio Alliance for Hope to address justice issues in our metropolitan region. That's why we sing and make music, pray and work, discuss and argue and decide. That's why we offer our treasure, our time, our talents to the Kingdom of God through this faith community.

Our mission statement dares to imagine that we can make a difference in the world. It boggles the mind to envision what might be possible if love trumped hatred, and all the gold or oil in the world could not turn God's people away from God's Kingdom of peace and righteousness.

During my growing up years, my parents stressed the importance of giving back in gratitude. In fact, I heard my father say "To whom much is given, much will be required" so many times, I was an adult before I learned that it came, not from the font of his parental wisdom, but from the Bible. It's a perspective I've heard cited from many of you, and I deeply resonate with the sense of responsibility called forth from privilege. But I wonder if any of us have really considered what is required of us when we see that the "much" we have been given is, in fact, everything.

Then let our stewardship be an expression of gratitude, a hallmark of our identity as members of God's family, a pledge to the One who alone is worthy to be worshiped and served.

**NOW TO THE RULER OF ALL WORLDS, UNDYING, INVISIBLE, THE ONLY GOD, BE THE HONOR AND GLORY FOREVER AND EVER! AMEN.**

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