

Twenty-ninth Sunday in Ordinary Time A - Render Unto God What Is God's

October 18, 2020

Brothers & Sisters, it is the sixth anniversary of my severe stroke on October 18, 2014. It paralyzed my right side, affected my ability to swallow, talk and limited my ability to breathe. I need to move around in a wheel chair, a tube for feeding and another for breathing. For the past six years, I have been wondering why I can still wake up every day breathing and see the day light. Maybe I still haven't render unto God what is God's; still owe Him.

God didn't create anything without a purpose. If you're breathing, you have a purpose. In Christ, you have something to offer the world. When God made you, he wired you in a certain way and uniquely shaped you for a contribution. Nobody has been you in the past or will be you in the future. God doesn't create clones or copies. Even identical twins are different in thousands of ways. Your thumbprint, voice, footprint, heartbeat, and eyes are unique. You're not one in a million. You're one in gazillions. God custom-made you. He wants you to be you. You may have heard all your life, *"Why can't you be more like your brother or sister?"* But if God hadn't wanted you to be you, then you wouldn't exist. And, yet, you may spend your life trying. God did not make you and put you here on this planet just to breathe air, take up space, and die. **If you're here, there's a contribution that only you can make.**

In this Sunday's Gospel reading (Matthew 22:15-22) Jesus says, ***"Render unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's."*** These words of Jesus have become a sort of proverb, and those who know little of scripture may still have heard "Render unto Caesar." Yet, digging beneath the surface of this short encounter helps uncover some of the deeper currents in the exchange. First, the combination of people approaching Jesus is intriguing. Matthew, in the Gospel tells us that the Pharisees come together with the Herodians. The Pharisees did not want to give money to their pagan oppressors and so opposed to paying taxes to Rome. On the other hand, King Herod's position of power came courtesy of the Romans, so even though the taxes were widely considered to be oppressive, the Herodians had a vested interest in keeping the Roman taxes paid. Therefore, the Pharisees and the Herodians each reflected one of the horns of the dilemma. Then came the question, ***"Is it lawful to pay taxes to the Emperor or not?"*** This reference is obviously to Jewish Law of Moses. Clearly, it was lawful to pay the tax by Rome's standards; the question was whether it was proper for a Jew to do so. It would seem that they have presented Jesus with no way out. He can't speak against the tax, for that would anger the Herodians and lead to a charge of treason against Rome. He could not speak in favour of the tax without alienating most of the crowds that followed him. Jesus asks for one of the coins used in paying the tax. This is Jesus' own trap, for it proves at least one among the questioners to be a hypocrite. For the coin used for the tax was a silver Denarius with the image of Caesar on one side, and on the reverse, the image of a woman named Pax or personified peace. The coins were against Jewish Law, which prohibited graven images.

Remember the incident when Jesus chased moneychangers from the outer courts of the Temple (Matthew 21:12-13)? These moneychangers had a business because one was required to exchange pagan currency for Temple coins before going to do business in the Temple. Carrying the image of Caesar into the Temple was considered sinful. But note that when Jesus asks for a Denarius, one is quickly located, thus proving the sinfulness of the questioners already. Jesus then asks the question everyone in Israel could have answered without a coin in hand. Jesus said, ***"Whose head is this and whose title?"*** In His point of argument, the word

“head” is “icon,” a Greek word “image.” The word “title” is “likeness.” When they answer Jesus’ question, saying that the image and likeness are “Caesar’s,” Jesus replies that they are to give to Caesar back those things that are Caesar’s. It is his coin anyway, who cares if Caesar gets back his coin for the tax. Then Jesus gives the most amazing line of the short encounter when he continues by saying that we are to **“give back to God the things that are God’s.”** It leaves everyone calculating what exactly is God’s that we are supposed to give back. And in case you were wondering, the clue was the word “icon” or “image” and the word “likeness.” mentioned before. Jesus’ answer came from Genesis 1:26-27, which says, **“And God said, ‘Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness,’” and goes on to state “God created humankind in his Image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.”** The principle is this: Just as the coin has Caesar’s icon on it, so it is Caesar’s, **we were made in the image and likeness of God, so we are God’s.** Jesus affirmed the tax while making it all but irrelevant. Jesus implies that, though we do owe the state, there are limits to what we owe. Yet, Jesus places no limits regarding what we owe to God. **Jesus says that everything we have and everything we are is God’s already.**

We have to stay attuned to the Presence of God in our lives, so that we can come to a deeper understanding of what it is that God wants from each of us, His call is deep within our hearts. If our hearts are closed to God, if our hearts are muddled with the immorality of the world, then we will not be able to discern the path God is calling us to fulfill. But, if we do our best to be good Christians, living our faith, then we will come to an understanding of the directions the Lord wants us to take so that we might do our bit in His plan for mankind. God used the pagan King Cyrus of Persia in the first reading (Isaiah 45:1,4-6) and the pagan Romans in the Gospel (Matthew 22:15-21) as instruments in the fulfilling of His plan. How much more will He use us, the people He has ushered into an intimate sharing of His life? **No one is insignificant in the battle for the Kingdom of God. Every one of us has a role to play in that Kingdom. We are all part of His Plan.**

What God wants is nothing less than to come and abide in our heart. The point is that we have been made in the image and likeness of God. God loves us. God keeps our picture in the divine wallet and on the heavenly refrigerator. Jesus did not care about the tax, for his real concern was that we live into the image and likeness of the God who lovingly created us. We do that by conforming our life to be more like Jesus’ life. Giving back to God through the church does matter, but merely giving money to the government, to this church or anywhere else is only part of the picture. To live more fully into that image and likeness of God that is in us, give back our heart to God – for it is God’s anyway. Under the cross, we can meet Jesus anew every time we adore, pray and meditate. So, **“What are the things that are God’s which we are to give back to God?” The answer is, “We!”**

This Sunday is also the **World Mission Sunday.** Let’s pray the monthly intention of Pope Francis **“We pray that by the virtue of baptism, the laity, especially women, may participate more in areas of responsibility in the Missions of the Church.”**