

The Twenty Third Sunday after Pentecost ~ Proper 24, Year A
October 19, 2008
Deacon Brett Backus

“And To God The Things That Are God’s”

Matthew 22:15-22

Returning to God through Lessening Self

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As I approached the small house on the Altiplano, an elderly man gently motioned for me to enter. Upon entering the home, the old man told me to take a seat and proceeded to offer me a local Bolivian beer, which I gladly accepted. However, after we both heartily toasted to health, as is custom in Bolivian culture, I noticed the old man do something strange which I had never witnessed before. Before taking his first swig, the old man ceremonially dipped his fingers into his glass and sprinkled some of the beer onto the floor of his house. When asked to explain his actions, the old man said that the indigenous people of Bolivia always give a portion of whatever they have to mother earth before enjoying what they have received as a way of recognizing their utter dependence on her.

Today’s Gospel is about giving ourselves to God. It is about living our lives in such a way that places God and God’s will before our own. Today’s Gospel is about forgetting ourselves, recognizing and accepting our complete dependence on God.

Normally today’s Gospel lesson is used to talk about tithing, and rightly so. It falls right in the middle of stewardship campaign time, and in the Gospel Jesus is telling the Pharisees and Herodians to fulfill their civic duties by paying taxes, etc., but at the same time to give to God what is God’s. It is the perfect lead in to talking about Christian tithing. Yet when I was preparing for today’s sermon, I could not bring myself to write only about tithing itself. At least not tithing in the way it is normally spoken about. In preparing for today’s sermon, I found myself needing to ask if Jesus was getting at something more than just financial responsibility to the Church.

See, I think that what Jesus is talking about in today’s Gospel is more than that. He is talking about us, you and me, and our relationship with God. Today, Jesus is calling us all to return to God. So is that really possible, and how do we do it? Well, I think that we as Christians are pretty comfortable with the fact that we are not perfect, nor can we ever be perfect, and that is the very reason that Jesus had to come and bail us out. We understand that as a fallen species, we are separate from God, and separation from God means sin. I

think that this is precisely what Jesus is getting at in today's Gospel. We are God's, yet we live in separation from God, and Jesus is calling us to return. Sometimes it seems like the biggest temptation that we brought into as humans was the belief that we are the owners of ourselves and not God. So we end up going through life being so full of our selves that there is very little room for God left. In a sense then, it is not possible for us to completely return ourselves to God or to completely eliminate sin in our lives. The reality is that this problem has already been solved for us by Jesus. Thank God for Grace right?

However, that fact does not stop us from trying to get closer to God every day of our lives. We do this because we know that the less we let ourselves get in the way and the more we let God live within us, the better off we are. Though we are painfully aware that we are not perfect, it is not difficult to see that the more we dedicate our lives to God from day to day, and the more we fill ourselves with Him instead of our own egos, our lives and those of the people around us are exponentially greater. Truly, only when we lose ourselves for His sake do we win our true lives. This is what Jesus calls us to do in today's Gospel, to fight this good fight and to die to ourselves daily. Jesus urges us in today's Gospel to struggle against ourselves and to prepare the world for His coming by becoming a God-filled not a self-filled presence on earth. So today I want to share with you just three ways that I think will help us on such a difficult journey. These three ways are prayer, the Eucharist, and tithing.

We can begin to give ourselves back to God through a disciplined prayer life. For most of us, prayer is something that we do when we need or want something from God. It is not something that we engage in on a constant or even remotely regular basis. Simply having a disciplined prayer life will help us to put God before ourselves in our daily life. In other words, it will help us give ourselves back to God. Now, disciplined prayer life is easy to say, but it is difficult to do unless you have some resources to fall back on. I am going to provide one for you here today. You see, fortunately, we Episcopalians actually have such a guide of our own and we use it every Sunday. Yes, I know that it is to the great astonishment of you all, but your Book of Common Prayer can and was actually intended to be used by you outside of Sunday Eucharist on a daily basis. In your BCP, under the first bold heading in the table of contents you will find four short simple prayer services completely laid out for you. You have Morning prayer, Noonday prayer, Evening prayer, and Night prayer or Compline, or you have even shorter daily devotions that can be used at anytime by anyone as well (oh and by the way, group morning prayer is offered daily and evening prayer on Tue., Wed., and Thur. evenings here at Ascension). This or some other form of disciplined prayer method is a very simple way in which we as Christians can cultivate the mentality of putting God before ourselves and giving our selves, the things of God, back to Him.

We can also begin to give our selves back to God through serious and conscious participation in the Eucharist. Simply recognizing and knowing in our heart that we are of God and that God lives in us can completely reorient us from living in an egocentric way to being God centered beings. Such a realization is possible when one seriously and consciously participates in the Eucharist by coming to this altar table and receiving Christ into themself through the sacraments. I would encourage all of us to mentally prepare ourselves before each time receiving the Eucharist, and to take seriously the meaning of this special miracle in which we participate weekly. In doing this, we begin to realize the fact that God is always with us through Christ and we begin to let His presence in our lives take precedence over our own ego and nature.

Finally, I want to bring us back to tithing. After my experience with the old man at the beginning of this sermon, my ideas about tithing were radically changed. Yes, tithing is a financial responsibility of the church community. If we love this community and what it provides for us then we have to take care of it. It is of us. Yet I want to encourage us all today to view tithing in a different way. Instead of viewing it as solely a financial responsibility, I encourage us all today to view tithing as a powerful tool. A tool that is meant to be used by us as a means of giving God what is His....our selves. Like my Bolivian friend, when we consciously sacrifice a part of our material blessings to God, we are in effect recognizing that we, along with all creation, are God's, and that God comes before us at all times because we are completely dependent upon Him for all things. Disciplined prayer life, conscious participation in the Eucharist, and a mature understanding of tithing can cultivate a consciousness that is truly aware of our dependence upon God. Only through such a consciousness can we truly begin to take seriously the very thing that Jesus teaches us in today's Gospel.

“Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's.” *Amen.*