

Title: Give to God the things that are God's

Date: 10/22/2023 (Proper 24, Year A)

Location: St. Alban's Episcopal Church

Service: 10am Holy Eucharist (Hybrid)

Readings: [Exodus 33:12-23](#); [Psalm 99](#); [1 Thessalonians 1:1-10](#); [Matthew 22:15-22](#)

Video Link: <https://youtu.be/Hat2UwAoIdg?t=1352>

Proclaim the greatness of our God,
and worship God on God's holy hill,
for our God is the Holy One. (Ps 99:9)
Amen.

Writing a sermon is like blending a smoothie: so many ingredients go into the final product. In the Episcopal Church, and in the broader Anglican tradition we belong to, for something to have authority it needs to stand on the three-legged stool: Scripture, Tradition, and Reason. To that the Methodists, which are offshoots of Episcopalians, add another "leg", experience.

When it comes to a sermon, Scripture refers to the readings. Reason and experience come through in discussing these passages with other Texas clergy and with the St. Alban's Bible Study group. Tradition refers to what the long line of theologians and scholars and preachers before and around me have said and believed about these verses.

As I start writing, I consider the conversations we've had this week. I think about what y'all are going through, how I'm praying with you. I try to read the news; some weeks that gets real rough. I think about where we're at in the church year, what we've been doing at St. Alban's, and where we're going.

Then the sermon writes itself. Words that speak directly to your heart and soul miraculously appear on the screen, multiplying like fishes and loaves. Ok, this last part is wishful thinking.

In addition to all those ingredients, there is the influence of the Holy Spirit, the person of the Trinity that one my friends¹ refers to as the Holy Joker. The Holy Joker laughs when we make plans. The Holy Joker flies alongside us as we rebuild a plan in mid-flight. Yes, I did mean to say PLAN.

When I looked at the readings for this week, I laughed. Clearly, the Holy Joker was at work when the week I was going to talk about giving to the church happened to be the same week we hear Jesus say, "Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's" (Mt 22:21).

If Jesus kicked the moneychangers out of the Temple, does that mean we shouldn't pass the plate in church? That we shouldn't ask for donations? That we shouldn't talk about money at all?

In the past, when I've read this verse, I hear Jesus saying, "Give to the world worldly things and set aside the lofty, the better, the spiritual things for God...and avoid cross contamination."

I've gotten better at NOT falling into the trap of thinking in terms of a body-mind duality when I read the letters of Paul. My mind no longer defaults to the binary of "body=bad", "spirit = good." Yet when I hear this verse, my mind starts sorting things into buckets.

Meditation? "This is of God."

Traffic laws? "This is of the world."

Church financials? "This is...of God?"

State and national politics? "This is of...the world?"

The more I think about it, the harder this gets.

Spiritual practices like meditation, gratitude, and Sabbath are less of God and more of the world when the focus is on physical health rather than our connection with God, when the goal is to do more rather than be more fully the image of the God.

Obedying traffic laws is a great way to love our neighbors as ourselves. Maybe that's the sign we should get TxDOT to put up along the I-35 frontage road in front of the church.

Church financials, or the business of the church, is about God's mission. But if we forget what the money is for, what the church is for, then it's no different from the financials of any other business. We start to worry more about profit than listening to prophets.

As for state and national politics, the Rev. William Barber II, who now leads the Poor People's Campaign, came and spoke to my seminary. **He told us that not engaging in public policy was a form of pastoral malpractice;** we can't minister to people's pastoral needs without understanding or confronting the situations and stressors that give rise to those needs.²

We, **all of us**, not just the person standing in the pulpit, can't fully engage in their challenging realities without also looking at the underlying causes, which are rooted in history and policies. What we think of as "pastoral care" requires more than thoughts and prayers.

But what do we say to those who use these words of Jesus to say we shouldn't talk about money or politics in church?

This week, I'm particularly grateful for the wisdom of our tradition. The writers of several commentaries point out something that I've completely missed.

One of them is Debie Thomas, minister of formation at St. Mark's Episcopal Church in Palo Alto. She writes, "It's important to note what Jesus does not say. He doesn't say that there are two distinct realms, the religious and the secular, and that they require

our equal fidelity. What he says is more complicated: the coin is already the emperor's—there's his face stamped right on it—so give it to him. And then consider the harder question: What belongs to God? What kind of tribute do you owe him? The Roman coins of Jesus' day bore the image of the emperor. As human beings created by God, we bear God's image. Which means, if we keep the analogy going, that we owe God everything—our whole and entire selves.”³

“Give to God the things that are God's.”

We bear the image of God. We bear the image of a God who shows us more love and grace than we can ever ask for or imagine. We are God's.

Every person we encounter, every living being, every living thing, every ray of sunshine, every rock and every drop of water, is God's. There's no way to draw a line between God and the world because the whole world is of God.

In the Old Testament, the people of Israel are told to offer their first fruits to God, whether it's the first batch of dough (Num 15:20-21) or the firstborn of the womb, or the best of the oil, wine, and grain, and choice fruits (Num 18:12-18). They were also told to offer a tenth of their inheritance (Num 18:26), or a tenth of what their fields produce (Deut 14:22, 2 Chr 31:5).

Offering God our first and our best is a sign of our deep gratitude. Offering God our first and our best helps us remember that everything comes from God and ultimately belongs to God.

When I was a greeter at Grace Cathedral, I was keenly aware that I was welcoming people into God's house, not my house. It didn't even belong to the parishioners, it was a place of God, a place for God, a place for all who walk in its doors to encounter God, a place for all who walk out of its doors to proclaim and share the abundant love and grace of God. We were stewards and caretakers. None of this was ours to claim or own; all this was ours to give away.

Christians today aren't told to sell everything they own and give it to the church to give away as they were in the Book of Acts, unless you go to one of those churches preaching the end of the world or the prosperity gospel. We talk more about being intentional and thoughtful about how we budget and how we spend, for as Jesus pointed out earlier in Chapter 6 of the gospel according to Matthew, “where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” (Mt 6:21)

Since we pray that God's will be done on earth, as it is in heaven, storing our treasure in heaven and not on earth doesn't look like staring up into the sky and looking away from all this; it looks like following the Spirit into the messiness on earth, seeing God not just in the skies but on our city streets. It's about praying to refuse “the sin of making complicated things simple and simple things complicated.”⁴

Instead of telling people that their suffering on earth will be rewarded in heaven or that this is part of God's plan, it looks like listening and learning in hopes of helping to address the causes of their suffering on earth; it looks like sitting with and walking alongside those who hurt and are hurting.

“Give to God the things that are God's.”

Years ago, a priest explained to me that tithing doesn't have to mean that 10% goes to the church. To be clear, I will NOT complain if that's how you much you decide to pledge to St. Alban's. And it's a helpful framework because for each of us, there may be other organizations that advance values and priorities that are of God. That priest simply asked that the church be one of our top priorities.

This is also a reminder for church to be aligned with God, to watch for how God is at work in this place, at this time. Coming up with the 2024 budget and working on the annual giving campaign for 2024 is a way for the staff and vestry to make sure we're very intentional in how we spend our money, that we're good stewards of the funds y'all have entrusted to us, and that our eyes are on God.

Some of you took part in the Holy Cow survey at the beginning of the year. The person who reviewed our results said that most churches want more young people and families with children because they're worried about survival. They want to make sure someone continues to pay the bills and volunteer for the ministries. And... that's not the reason people will stay.

They stay because we have something to share, a place to belong and a place to become. Here we strive to encounter God, to follow the way of Jesus, and to open our hearts and minds to the workings of Holy Spirit. We join to heal what's been broken, to name and lift up who and what's been forgotten. We learn to see the abundance of love and grace we've received and to give that away as generously as God has been generous to us.

When I was in Jerusalem, I kept thinking, “All these people came searching for Jesus, and God gave us each other, the body of Christ.” And that's true of every church. We are shaped by the life we share, formed by the way we nurture **and** challenge each other. This is where we put theory, I mean theology, into practice.

Living in the world, we need to be clear about the priorities and principles that guide our decisions. In Christian ethics we talked about topics such as whether or not torture is acceptable and when and if war is ever justified. Realistically, most of us won't be asked to make decisions like that.

Most of our decisions look like: Do we call the police about the young man hanging out in the entryway? What do we do with the loved one we are estranged from? Are we willing to be an active bystander? Will we speak truth at Thanksgiving dinner, or coffee hour?

“Give to God the things that are God's.”

What does that look like? Let's keep exploring the answers, together.

Amen.

¹ Hello, Peter Grace!

² <https://faithandleadership.com/william-j-barber-ii-we-have-dare-preach-the-gospel>

³ <https://www.christiancentury.org/print/pdf/node/32991>

⁴ https://www.instagram.com/p/CyZtYmUs84c/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&igshid=MzRlODBiNWFlZA==