

**18 October 2020**

**Twenty-Ninth Sunday in Ordinary Time**

*Matthew 22:15-21*

I googled “Jokes on taxes” and liked this one: A couple of weeks after going to mass and becoming aware of his sin of dishonesty regarding his taxes, a man wrote the following letter to the IRS: "I have been unable to sleep, knowing that I have cheated on my income tax. I understated my taxable income, and have enclosed a check for \$150. If I still can't sleep, I will send the rest."

I lived in Seattle in the mid-80's. It was shortly after the US Bishop had published a pastoral letter about the morality or immorality of war. It allowed for a nation to possess nuclear weapons, but only as a deterrent—if we have ‘em then another country dare not use ‘em against us, but it declared that it was absolutely immoral to possess nuclear weapons that were geared exclusively to strike first, and not in self-defense. Well, when I moved out to Seattle for those years, I quickly became aware of Archbishop Hunthausen, who frequently protested across Puget Sound on the Olympic Peninsula where they made and maintained submarines and missile systems with first strike capability. As you might imagine, he was a controversial archbishop! Why I bring it up today is that he also figured out how much those nuclear weapons cost as a percentage of the federal budget and he refused to pay that percentage of his taxes owed. As far as I know, he was never sent to jail and I'm sure that in one way or another, the government got his money. This was controversial, but hardly something he would be embarrassed about telling Jesus on Judgment Day.

You might have heard of the Hyde amendment in Congress. It's similar, to Hunthausen's ploy but different because it was written into law. No money that we send to the federal treasury will be used for elective abortions. Another example of Taxation and Morality.

**For the most part, though, we don't get a menu of items where we'd like our tax dollars to go or not go. As part of a wider society with have to compromise and put into the common kitty.** We vote in part so that we elect people that share our values and will spend money and things we deem good.

**But in Jesus' time, this tax the Gospel account talks about was especially irksome and disgusting to the people.** All of it went to Rome to support and Emperor they resented and maintained the army that oppressed them and even crucified people who agitated for independence. And so when a large crowd gathered for Passover—this reading takes place right between Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday and the day of the Last Supper, or Holy Tuesday—the Pharisees try to entrap Jesus into saying something that will get him in trouble. If he says “Yes, of course it's allowed to pay the tax,” then to the proud independent Jews he will seem like a weak collaborator with the Roman Empire, but if he says “No, don't pay the tax,” then while exciting the crowd with his courage he could be reported to the Governor for treason and arrested. I suspect that rather than compromise his courage, his heart was pulled toward not cooperating with the Romans. However, he seized the opportunity to make a larger point.

He asked for a Roman coin, which, interestingly, the Pharisee had. Apparently he had made his choice. And as we hear, Jesus held it up as asked him whose image was on the coin. Hearing it was Caesar's, the emperor's, he told them to give to Caesar what was Caesar's and to God what was God's. Intriguing! He won't get arrested for tax evasion, but neither can he be accused of watering down our call to love God

with all our heart, mind, soul and strength. **After all, what is God's? What part of our lives or our world does not belong to God? (Ps 24:1 "The earth is the Lord's and all it holds.")**

I hear in Jesus' clever response an invitation. In this world where so often we have to compromise for the sake of getting along or the common good, we are invited to cultivate that freedom of heart, mind and soul, where we hold nothing back from God, where we know that God alone fills and we want nothing more than to empty ourselves, give all of our lives back to God, by our devotion to God and by how we love one another.

I've been trying to teach our school children to give a loud **"Amen" after the Eucharistic Prayer because what we are saying is so important.** As Jesus expressed his great freedom of heart by offering his life to the Father for all of us, at the end of the Eucharistic Prayer we are all invited to join ourselves today to his ONE TOTAL OFFERING. We are saying, **"Just as Jesus offered his life totally to God, so we do as also, in through, with and in him.** No wonder the poet Annie Dillard said that if we really knew what we were doing when we prayed the Eucharistic Prayer we would all wear crash helmets.